



# 学園キノ

— GAKUEN KINO —

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4

電撃文庫

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This novel is most definitely a work of fiction.

It may bear some resemblance to real events, truths, Kino's Journey ~the Beautiful World~, firearms, fried chicken, and warriors of justice, but no one knows if this is a coincidence or not.

**Prologue: Kino**  
**~She is KINO~**

"From my cold! Dead! Hands!"

A clear voice called forth a burst of light.

The light gathered towards the owner of the voice.

A girl with short black hair, dressed in a sailor uniform, had just begun to be enveloped in a brilliant glow.

The model gun in her right hand, held high in the air.

Her green school uniform.

The red tie over her chest.

The belt around her waist.

The little pouches and the holsters on her belt.

The cell phone strap hanging from the belt.

Her swaying skirt.

Her indoor shoes, marked with red stripes.

All covered in a blinding flash of light.

The image of the silhouette of the naked fictional teenager was drawn—

Just hazy enough to keep the veins in the censors' heads intact.

A second later:

*Ta-Dah!*

With a fanfare that sounded oddly like someone saying goodbye, light scattered in all directions.

Standing in its wake was a warrior of justice.

Dressed in a green sailor uniform, with the silly addition of a pair of red school-issue track pants, was our hero—Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino (shortened to Kino from this point forth), ready for action so quickly in the book.

"Transformation complete! Show evil no mercy and seal away those demons!" Cried Hermes, the chic green leather-and-metal cell phone strap on her belt.

"I will." Kino answered quickly and calmly.

She lowered her transfigured model gun (which still looked the same as before), the mysterious super-weapon that could revert demons back to human state—Big Cannon~ Shining Iron Demon Destroyer. She quickly took aim and pulled the trigger.

*Bang!*

With a sharp noise, A mysterious bullet was launched from Big Cannon by the ignition of mysterious gunpowder, spinning mysteriously as it mysteriously drew a mysterious arc in the air.

*Bam!*

It landed square on the demon's back.

They were currently on the roof of the school. The demon stood in the middle of the rooftop, and Kino was in front of the staircase doors. There was no one else around them.

The sky was a clear blue on this beautiful autumn day. From the looks of the sun shining high in the heavens, it was just before midday.

"I don't believe it... I could get these jobs done so much more easily if no one got in my way all the time." Kino mumbled in awe, holstering Big Cannon on her right side.

Before her eyes was a badger-shaped demon, three meters in size, slowly reverting back to human form under the sunlight with a sizzle.

Nine seconds passed.

Lying there on the concrete floor was a young man in his second year of high school. He was uninjured.

This student was the victim who had fallen to temptation today.

The situation:

Approximately ten minutes ago, the young man was desperately making his way through his language midterm.

Because he was more science-and-math oriented, this student's language marks were not quite up to snuff. He had already spent too much time on the reading comprehension part of his midterm, and was now anxiously trying to finish the remainder of his test.

After this, midterms would be finished. Their long and arduous exam season would be over very soon. The young man decided that he would climb up to the rooftop after the test and doze off with his eyes on the clear blue sky.

"Five minutes left, everyone. Make sure you've written your names at the top of your papers."

The teacher's advice, well-meaning but only more pressure-inducing, drove the young man to scribble away more furiously than before. Soon, he came across a strange question:

[Have you finally answered all of the questions on this exam? Answer honestly. (15 points)]

If he was in a right state of mind, he would have noticed the peculiarities.

Their infamously strict teacher would never include such a lighthearted question on their midterm. On top of that, *no* teacher would allocate fifteen marks out of a hundred to a joke question like this.

In fact, many other students had read over the same question. And everyone but this young man realized:

*'This is demonic temptation!'*

With this in mind, they creatively answered the question with answers like [Dunno], [Too hard to answer], [The year 1185 or the year 1192], [Liver and leek meal combo], [This is obviously demonic temptation], or ignored it outright.

But perhaps the stress of the exam had gotten to this student. He found himself writing:

[Yes! I'm done!]

He sighed in relief and blacked out instantly.

A bespectacled female classmate sitting next to him watched as he slowly transformed.

"Idiot." She mumbled disdainfully.

The students in the class exited the room. At the same time, the demon alarm went off in the entire school building. With only three minutes before the end of midterms, the entire student body and faculty was forced to evacuate.

"Damn it! Why now?!"

"Who's the idiot this time?!"

"If you're gonna fall to temptation, can't you at least do it three minutes after the exam *starts*? School rules say we can take the midterm again then."

"Maybe if he just destroys the school and gives us some days off... But I guess Mysterious Kino's going to take care of him."

"Hey, wanna go over to the student cafeteria?"

The students chattered amongst themselves as they calmly evacuated the premises as usual.

Meanwhile, the protagonist:

"Eeeek! This is terrible! I'm so scared! What do we do?!"

She quickly broke off from the escaping students with acting skills worthy of this year's Razzie. She discovered the demon disappearing towards the rooftop as it broke down the walls, and began to quietly follow after it.

Once she confirmed that all the students had been safely evacuated, Kino transformed as she stepped onto the rooftop and instantly landed her shot.

That's all for the recap.

Having completed her mission with ease, Kino's dark eyes looked up at the blue skies as she mumbled:

"Ah, I'm hungry."

As Kino strode away, leaving behind the reverted student without a care—

"Hm. Two second too late in putting on my underwear." Mumbled a man wearing a red apple and a dove on his head, a white mask over his face, a white cape, a pair of white doggy ears, a white school uniform, and a katana.

This pervert will appear again in the story.

*Whoosh.* As the pervert disappeared from the rooftop,

"Damn it... 0.6 seconds too late to put on my sunglasses..." Mumbled a young man wearing a long black coat, a pair of sunglasses, and holding a pair of Magpul Masada assault rifles.

This weirdo will also appear again in the story.

[Narration: Kino]

Is it good or bad? I can't really say.

Anyway, like many people, I was raised in the country where I was born.

I'm from a very ordinary family of gun lovers.

That's why I don't know a thing about the trials and tribulations of people who collect guns, or the dilemmas of people who hate them.

When I was little, I wanted to become an eating contest champion because that was the only way I could eat for free.

There's nothing more awesome and beautiful than eating as much food as possible, as fast as possible.

But two months before I graduated from elementary school, the TV Tokyo Broadcasting Station taught me that that was impossible.

This is why I entered my current high school.

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### **An introduction to the characters of this story:**

#### Kino

A female student in her fourth year at the academy. (Equivalent to her first year of high school)

No matter what anyone might tell you, she is the main character of this story. She also has the most appearances in the series. "Kino" is her family name. Her given name has yet to be revealed.

With a holstered model gun and a belt with pouches full of firearms around her sailor uniform, she is a perfectly ordinary student attending a secondary school in Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture. The kind of girl you might see in your own neighborhood.

Transforming into the warrior of justice, 'Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino', she fights day and night against demons—students who have fallen to the temptation of evil—that attack the schools, all in order to turn them back into human form. She is accompanied by Hermes, the talking cell phone strap.

#### Hermes

A mysterious talking cell phone strap.

A character possessed of a truly mysterious anatomy. Where are his eyes, nose, and mouth? No one knows, and no one is allowed to know. He provides Kino with the power to transform and fight demons, free of charge. In short, he is her guide.



He is the only sane man (only sane cell phone strap) in this work full of crazies, so everything he does is very jarring. It's all good as long as the readers don't notice.

Hermes sometimes transforms into a motorcycle to assist Kino, but right now his abilities are limited to use in battle.

### Shizu

A male student in his sixth year at the academy. (Equivalent to his third year of high school)

The top student in his year, a handsome and popular young man who always carries a sword at his side. His full name is also a mystery. This is most definitely not because the author is too lazy to make one up for him.

He's quite close to Kino now, thanks to certain circumstances. He's also an acquaintance of Inuyama, and is a member of the Take Action Now Club. Other than his blatant disregard for weapon possession laws, he is a man of utter perfection.

But unbeknownst to all is his true identity as the self-proclaimed warrior of justice, Samoyed Mask. Thanks to his constant interruptions during Kino's battles with the demons, he has earned himself a place at the top of her To-Kill-List. Kino already considers him a worse threat than the demons, so he always gets a barrage of bullets in return for his greetings. But he always escapes unscathed by use of his sword or tomatoes.

His greatest weakness is Ti. Every time he sees her, he is struck by a wave of agony that paralyzes him on the spot. His fear of her seems to be rooted in some traumatic past event, but the specifics of the incident are still unknown. It must be true! The author says so.

### Samoyed Mask

See: Shizu

Do we still need this subheading?

### Inuyama Wanwan Rikutarou

A classmate of Kino. He is a beautiful boy with long, soft white hair who would probably look great in drag. Is quite popular with the girls, although not as much as Shizu. When they are together, they become even more popular among certain groups of girls. The specifics are unclear.

Thanks to his unrelentingly realistic stalker-like behavior towards Kino, Inuyama has earned her hatred. He also shows a great deal of hostility towards Shizu, but the reasons are a mystery. The biggest mystery of the series.

Chako-sensei is very fond of Inuyama, often hugging him from behind and putting her chin on his head.

### Detective Wanwan

A mysterious white-haired boy in black clothes and sunglasses who fights using the Septuple-Gun Fist Style, a dangerous martial art that involves dual-wielding guns while evading bullets. He looks quite familiar, but this is probably just a coincidence.

When fighting demons, he assists Kino in obsessively targeting Samoyed Mask. Kino sees him as someone very reliable. Just make out already!

Ti seems to be very fond of Detective Wanwan. Once she gets a hold of him from behind, he is rendered powerless.

#### Kuroshima Chako

An English teacher in her early twenties who suddenly stirred up a storm with her arrival. She started up the Take Action Now Club by spectacularly threatening the principal.

She is a stylish, mature woman with white hair and emerald-green eyes. Thanks to her strange personality, she is very popular with the students.

For some reason, she is extremely fond of Inuyama and has a tendency to hug him from behind and rest her chin on his head.

#### Ti

A stoic+silent girl who appears on the battlefield out of nowhere.

She looks to be about twelve years old, and has white hair and emerald-green eyes. She effortlessly throws around Mk 2 grenades (the type used by the US military) like a seasoned warrior.

It seems very certain that she has some sort of history with Samoyed Mask.

For some reason, she is extremely fond of Detective Wanwan and has the tendency to hug him from behind and rest her chin on his head. Yeah, she's definitely on our side.

**Chapter 7 - A Land That Needs a Diva**  
**~the Shooting Diva~**

## **Chapter 7 - Part 1: Take Action Now!**

**~S-RU!~**

It was the day after the last day of exams.

The students had the day off today.

It was a beautiful autumn Thursday. One o'clock in the afternoon, Japanese Standard Time.

Kino lazed around until midday, napping until the sun was high in the sky. She slept in, then stuffed herself with lunch at the dormitory cafeteria before taking a breather in the common room.

The common room was large, and located between the boys' and girls' dormitory buildings.

Kino was currently wearing a set of red school-issue sweatshirt and track pants, the very picture of un-sexy. This outfit was also known as 'The Dormitory Uniform'.

Over the chest of the T-shirt she wore under the sweatshirt were the words [This *is* the Battle of Nagashino, right?] in Russian and Portuguese.

Around her waist was, as usual, her belt and pouches, and of course, Hermes.

The gun belt was a poor match for her current outfit, but Kino was probably the only student in the world who wore her gym clothes with a gun belt to begin with.

There were rows of couches and bookshelves in the common room. Because dormitory students provided a continuous supply of old magazines and comic books with the rationale 'Better than throwing them away', the common room was the perfect place to kill time.

On most holidays, the common room was quite crowded. But because exams had just ended, everyone must have gone out to play today—the room was empty.

Kino quietly browsed through the reading material—a teen fashion magazine from several months ago, an informational brochure about Yokohama, a guns-and-military magazine, a gaming magazine, and some weekly comic magazines.

"Oh, if it isn't Kino! Didn't you go out today?" Said a female student, stepping into the common room.

She was tall and slender, and had semi-long black hair. She was also a dormitory student, wearing jeans and a grey sweatshirt. It looks like all dormitory students prefer to dress comfortably when they're indoors.

She was in her third and final year of high school, and was an upperclassman to Kino. Her energetic and lively attitude made her quite popular with her underclassmen.

"Hey there, senpai. I'm staying in because I don't have a lot of allowance left." Kino answered. Cut down on the food, Kino. Just to note, the upperclassman's name was Sato. I came up with this just now. Just to note, she's currently retired, but she was once the ace of the volleyball team. I came up with this just now. Her house is far away, and her family runs a liquor store. I came up with this just now. Yes, this is canon.

"I see. Anyway..."

Sato trailed off, and pointed towards the large LCD-TV sitting in the room.

It was a new model that had recently been installed, optimized for digital cable broadcasts.

The screen was a whopping fifty inches long. It was like a gigantic piece of flooring.

The TV was capable of recording and playback with its built-in hard disk and Blu-ray player. It also had a high-speed internet cable, so people could watch videos from the internet. This is foreshadowing.

The common room had once been home to a 21-inch television set with a VHS. You can feel the difference now. The students were ecstatic to hear of the new television being installed.

As a side note, the TV was securely fastened to the room to prevent it from falling over in earthquakes or being stolen. Unfortunately, there had been some thefts in the dormitories in the past.

When there were many students in the common room, there were often battles fought over control of the remote—Let's watch dramas, the news, no, let's watch movies—but obviously, no such wars were currently taking place.

"I'm gonna use the TV. There's a concert I want to watch, and this totally beats looking at my tiny computer screen." Sato said, producing a clear blue Blu-ray case from her pocket.

Sato turned on the TV, ejected the Blu-ray tray, and inserted the disk. A moment later, the screen shifted to DVD/Blu-ray mode. She cranked up the volume.

As Kino watched from behind, Sato turned around.

"Kino, are you a fan of Anete Harami?"

Kino tilted her head.

"I don't think I've tried that before. What does it taste like?" Kino asked obliviously. Sato made a face like she had just bitten into an under-ripe persimmon.

"I'm not talking about food. I'm talking about the singer. Anete Harami."

"Huh?"

"The super-popular idol singer. Have you really never heard of her?"

This wasn't anything to be proud of, but Kino was very ill-informed when it came to matters of the world. Kino shook her head, answering that she honestly had no idea.

"Well, she's very popular in Japan right now, and her name's just started getting out to the rest of Asia. She's only thirteen years old right now, but she's adorable! She's a Japanese-English mix, and she looks like a doll! She was even on last year's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* competition!"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* is an annual music show in Japan, broadcast on NHK.

For your reference, there are few descriptions as short-lived as "Appeared in last's year's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* competition".

"Huh."

Even Kino had heard about the *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*. Leave it to her to know things about battle.

"She's not just cute, she's also a great singer! Her voice is so much more powerful than you might think from the way she looks, but it's also delicate and full of emotion. She's a real angel! An angel descended from heaven to sing! Oh, it's starting!"

The screen flickered, and a warning claiming [The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal, and will cast a curse that makes a woman crawl out of your screen] flashed on, along with several corporate logos.

The screen went black for several seconds. Suddenly, it cut to an image of a gigantic, dimly-lit stage and concert hall. The cheer of the fans roared through the speakers.

"This is her Yokohama live concert from this summer. I really wanted to go, but I couldn't get a hold of tickets! I kept my DVD tucked away for after exams."

It was clear from Sato's tone that she was terribly excited for this performance.

The concert began. There was a maddeningly slow prelude, followed by an explosive noise and the roar of excited fans. Smoke and light filled the stage as the band began to play in earnest.

Watching it all on a big-screen TV and Blu-ray was something else altogether. Every face in the crowd was clearly visible. If you were ditching work to go to this concert, you would be busted in less than a second.

Kino, who had nothing to do in particular, watched the show over Sato's shoulder.

The diva made her appearance under the spotlight. The crowd cheered even louder than before.

"Thank you, everyone! Here we go! Welcome to the Yokohama live concert!"

Bellowing on the stage in a high-pitched voice was a small, fragile-looking girl.

Although she was supposed to be of mixed descent, she looked overwhelmingly caucasian with her height and slender figure.

She had beautiful features, pale skin, and long light brown hair. Her eyes were grey. She wore a bright yellow dress and was holding a lavishly decorated microphone. She was, in a word, a doll.

Her song began.

It was a typical love song with lyrics that went "I think of him and something-or-other", but...

"Whoa..."

Anete Harami's vocal capacity was enough to surprise even Kino.

First of all, she was just plain good at singing. She was very expressive.

She was also powerful. Where in that slender form could all this strength come from? It was as though the speakers themselves were throwing punches at the audience. *Whoosh. Smack! More~.*

"Omigosh! I love you, Anete!" Sato cried. Kino looked back and forth between her upperclassman and the screen, enjoying the concert.

The first song ended, and the cheer of the crowds continued. The second song began.

A powerful guitar solo started things off. The spotlight shone on the stoic guitarist. He was soon followed by the bass.

Anete Harami began to sing along to their powerful beat.

The lyrics were something like "I'm always watching over you as you watch over me or something-or-other".

It was a sweet piece of rock that ended with a sincere "And that's why I love you!".

"...?"

Kino noticed something.

Inside the screen, Anete Harami was singing to the best of her abilities.

Her beautiful voice reached Kino's ears.

But something's off. Something's not right, Kino's soul whispered.

"Um..."

She focused her sense of hearing, looking at the screen.

A split second later, her eyes took on the look of a hunter stalking its prey. Kino was surrounded by the aura she usually only took on in the moments before she undertook an eating challenge.

About a dozen seconds later, Kino realized what had been bothering her about the concert.

"Senpai..." She said tentatively at the back of Sato's head. Sato, however, did not look back at her as she answered, "What is it?".

Like an idiot, Kino asked:

"Is it just me, or... is that girl not actually singing?"

And so,

"Kino! Sit down right now!"

"But I *am* sitting..."

"Never mind, just sit!"

"Okay."

Kino was royally told off by Sato, who paused the concert on the spot.

Obviously, it was quite inconsiderate of Kino to suggest that the singer was lip-synching to the song, in the presence of an excited fan who was finally blowing off post-midterm stress. Learn to be more thoughtful, Kino.

"Anete is *not* lip-synching! She's a genius vocalist! She puts up posts on her blog about how much she loves singing every day! She sings in person at her concerts!" Sato said, her eyes wide.

"Uh... Sorry, senpai. I guess I was just seeing things."

Kino had no evidence to support her claim save for her own intuition. So she apologized. Very sorry.

Sato seemed to be satisfied with Kino's apology.

"You don't have anything else to do, right? Then watch the rest of it!"

Or maybe she was still mad, and was demanding more apology and compensation. Sato forced Kino to watch the entire two-hour concert, including the encore performance. *Blip*, went the 'play' button.

It was true that Kino had nothing else to do. So she watched the concert to the end of the end, until Anete Harami came on stage in the same T-shirt as the stage crew to sing three more songs.

Her vocal technique was flawless. Kino watched the concert, ignoring the nagging feeling. It was a good way to spend two hours.

Once the concert ended, Kino turned around. The common room was filled with dormitory students. Anete really *is* popular, isn't she?

"Let's watch it from the beginning again!"

"Yeah, rewind the tape!"

"This is a Blu-ray, you know..."

As the students chattered, Kino excused herself first and sauntered back to her room.

Although her room contained nothing but a low-frame bed, a desk, and a closet, Kino had little to complain about. The fact that it was a single room was also a plus. These days, dormitories that only have double or triple-plus rooms can't compete with the single rooms.



Kino shut the door, locked it, undid her belt, and addressed Hermes, who was hanging from it.

"What do you think, Hermes? Was I right?"

It was a vague question, but Hermes answered as though having understood.

"Yeah. That girl wasn't singing at all. They were just playing a song they recorded ahead of time."

"Hah! I knew it!"

Kino put on her what-did-I-say look (Note: An uppity look that just screams "I told you so". Also known as arrogance or condescendence).

Hermes continued.

"But the vocal track wasn't coming from a CD or something. It was recorded to make it sound like she was singing for real. They changed it to make it sound more like a concert, and they changed parts along the way really slightly to adjust for audience reactions. They took so many precautions that I wouldn't be surprised if most normal people didn't notice, even if they had great ears."

"Huh. So are you saying that I'm *not* normal?"

"Wait, *are* you?"

"...Never mind." Kino said, hanging up her holster and plopping down onto her bed. She pulled a thin blanket covered with logos of gun manufacturers over herself.

"It's not like any of that has anything to do with us. Wake me up at dinnertime, Hermes."

Two seconds later, Kino dove deep into the abyss of her afternoon nap.

"Nothing to do with us, huh?" Hermes wondered.

If it really *was* irrelevant, I wouldn't use up all these pages talking about it.

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The next day. It's the day after Thursday, so...

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Yes, it's Friday! (Note to editorial dept.: Please check to see if this part is accurate. -Sigsawa)

Tomorrow was Saturday, and the weekend would begin. But students had to return to class today anyway to receive their graded midterms from the classes they had today. Of course, some of the lazy teachers wouldn't give them back until next week.

In life, there are two things you never want to see: Your crush going on a date with someone else, and atrocious marks.

Kino reluctantly strode up the hill, blending in with her downcast fellow students. What is this, a funeral?

It was cloudy today, much colder than yesterday. Autumn is generally in full swing by late October.

As usual, Kino was wearing her sailor uniform, her holster, and her belt with Hermes. She walked with her beige bag slung over her shoulder, and yawned loudly. Looks like someone needs an infusion of passionate spirit.

"Don't let your guard down." Hermes whispered quietly.

"We haven't had a demon attack in two days. I think I can relax for a while."

Sure, but it looks like our protagonist is forgetting something—after midterms, club activities were scheduled to start up again.

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The school day mostly consisted of getting back test papers and taking up the answers.

As soon as Kino received her papers,

"Ha. What are these numbers at the top corner of my test papers? They mean nothing to me." She said sharply, and tossed aside the midterm's very existence from her consciousness.

To give you an idea about Kino's grades, she had avoided failing, make-up classes, and make-up tests by a hair. It looks like the only thing she really didn't know was the answers.

Of course, you have to consider the fact that she had been occupied with club activities with Inid until just before midterms. Consider=Take someone else's situation into account.  
Carouse=Drink and make merry.

Another reason for her grades would be that Hermes did not offer her even a tiny bit of help, despite their agreement for mutual assistance. But it was really no fault of his.

After afternoon classes and homeroom period, Kino stood from her seat to return to the dorms. At that very moment—

"Locked on to club member!"

Chako-sensei, who had suddenly appeared behind her, grabbed Kino by the arms and smiled.

"Whoa! Let go!"

Kino was dragged into the hallway. Chako-sensei pulled her along and began to squawk out a song.

"The school you're in, for example~♪ Oh yeah~♪ Over the sky~♪"

I know this must be really really really really really really tough for you, Kino, but you have to take it like a man.

Inuyama quietly followed behind them.

Today's club room was the music prep room.

"From this day forth, this will be your place!" Chako-sensei cried, opening the door and tossing Kino inside. What is she, driving a slave ship?

The beautiful teacher Kuroshima Chako-sensei, she of white hair, green eyes, and gorgeous features, was wearing a dark grey pantsuit. It was unusual to see her not wearing a skirt, but as usual, Chako-sensei looks good in everything.

"We will hereby begin our elegant, sexy club activities! What's happening this week, Miss Chako? Rock, paper, scissors!" She cried.

She was a beautiful teacher, at least when she wasn't talking.

She was a beautiful teacher, at least when she wasn't talking. This is such an important point that I thought I should repeat myself.

Kino, who had been tossed like a cat, acted in a very feline manner as she calmly and gently landed on her feet without a fuss.

"Man..."

Because Kino knew that complaining to this particular teacher would do absolutely nothing to help her, she just took a seat in a nearby chair.

This was the music prep room.

Located right next to the music room, it was used for storage purposes.

This was why the room took up quite a bit of space. Despite the fact that instruments and equipment were hanging from the walls with no room to spare, it was enough space for the Take Action Now Club to conduct their activities. The room was also soundproof enough that they could make a ruckus inside without causing anyone trouble.

In the middle of the room was a large work table for fiddling with instruments. There were chairs around it. Because the room was on a higher floor in the school building, the view out the window was also quite wonderful.

"You look well, Kino. We haven't spoken since Narita Airport, have we?" Said a young man who was already sitting opposite the table from Kino.

He was a sixth year student wearing a pristine white school uniform. He had slightly long hair and handsome features, and was tall, slender, and composed.

A single dove suddenly appeared out of somewhere and flew past him. In slow motion, at that.

This dove's name is Carl. (Question 1: Write out this sentence in English.)

Although Kino could not see at the moment, there was a katana sheathed in a black scabbard hanging from his left side. For your information, there is only one student in this school who carries around a katana. One is more than enough.

Kino greeted him back courteously.

"It's been a while, Shizu-senpai."

His name was Shizu. End of explanation.

"You come on in too, Inuyama!"

Chako-sensei had scarcely finished her sentence by the time the boy who had followed her and Kino from the classroom finally stepped inside. He quietly shut the door.

This student was a handsome young man with white hair. *Kino no kurasumēto*.

His name was Inuyama Wanwan Rikutarō. His incurable stalker tendencies towards Kino had, for some reason, disappeared entirely since the incident at Narita Airport.

As a side note, the 'incident at Narita Airport' was, of course, their farewell to Inid at the airport back in Volume 3. Tears, farewells, and *unagi-don* specials.

Kino turned to Inuyama.

"..."

She tilted her chin so-very slightly. That was it. Quite a different reception from Shizu just now. But Inuyama did not seem to mind.

"Let's do our best today, too." He smiled.

Then,

"Hey there."

Inuyama's eyes met Shizu's. The latter was wearing a refreshing smile on his face.

"Good afternoon." Inuyama replied simply, and took a seat at a different table.

"What a sight, seeing all of us together again!"

Let's set aside trying to argue that four people sitting apart at a table is an amazing sight. Shizu addressed Chako-sensei first.

"We've been absent from club activities for so long. What do you have planned for us today, sensei? Whatever it is, I've been looking forward to it."

"First, let's have some tea and sweets!" Chako-sensei said immediately.

She immediately pulled out an elegant tea set from under the table. A beautiful porcelain tea pot and a set of teacups. Where in the world had they been hiding all this time? They

certainly didn't *look* like they belonged in a music prep room. Chako-sensei must have brought the set herself.

She then gingerly produced a box that was clearly from a local bakery.

"Ah... AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Kino screamed upon catching sight of the box. The bulletproof windows that had been installed to prevent damage from demon attacks rattled in their frames. Deja vu, no?

"Th-th-th-this... Th-th-this is..."

It was a box from the most popular bakery in the area!

It was a famous store that magazine articles had been written about. It had even been introduced on television.

Every last one of their products was beautiful and delicious, but their shortcake with extra-large strawberries was famous for flying off the shelves the moment they were baked.

They were very difficult to obtain even for people with a great deal of time on their hands. These cakes were being sold for ridiculous prices on auctions over the internet. Delivery took two days.

"A cake? Excellent. Sugar, also known as glucose, provides energy to the brain and gives us the strength to function." Shizu explained.

"Lalala~♪ Let's begin~♪ our tea party~♪ The Boston Tea Party~♪ Lalala~ the year 1773~♪"

Chako-sensei awkwardly hummed out a song as she expertly set the table for their tea party.

She produced a tablecloth out of nowhere and spread it over the table. She set the saucers and cups, poured the already-boiled water into the cups, and finally placed the large platter with the multicolored thirteen-piece cake in the middle of the table.

"You know what happens after school? Tea time! You three must be exhausted from your midterms. So let's enjoy ourselves! Let your youth fly into the sky!"

"..."

Kino stared at the shining cake.

And without caring who was watching, she burst into tears. Saline dribbled from her eyes like waterfalls.

"Sensei..."

"What is it, Kino?" Chako-sensei, who was by Kino's side before she knew it, asked in a positively motherly tone.

Kino sniffled and spoke weakly, her voice nasal from crying.

"I... I'm so glad I joined the Take Action Now Club."

Chako-sensei knelt before her and wiped Kino's face with her fingers.

"There, there. Don't cry, Kino. I just wanted to make some wonderful memories with you and the other club members. Now, let's wipe those tears. You're going to get salt in this delicious cake."

Kino looked up at Chako-sensei, her tears glistening. She then feebly squeezed out a voice:

"Can I really eat this cake? ...Can I eat more than two pieces?"

"Of course! Feast your eyes, Kino. These sweet little slices can't wait for you to devour them. Can't you hear them? 'Eat me, eat me!', they're saying in those wonderful, aromatic voices. Now, let's get started with our club activities!"

"Sensei..."

Looks like both of them have gone through some characterization changes.

Kino dug into her cake.

She finished all of her cake. Quick as usual.

Their furious tea time ended.

"This is bliss..." Kino said, thinking that she was probably the fourth-happiest person in the world.

"Now, let's get started with our *real* club activities!" Chako-sensei said.

"Of course."

"I knew it."

Shizu and Inuyama said.

"..."

Kino was overcome by the sudden urge to run away as fast as her legs could carry her. But —

"Hm..."

Before her eyes were an empty cup that once held some very delicious tea, and ten empty cake slice wrappings piled atop one another. If nothing else, Kino could not ignore the favor known as free food.

The students waited for Chako-sensei to speak.

"Everyone. There's something I want you all to work very hard at."

Chako-sensei had never looked so grimly determined. Was she planning to force the students to kill each other until there was only one survivor, like in that best-selling novel from ten years ago?

Actually, they've already tried. They've already tried to kill each other in their transformed states.

"What is it?" Shizu asked quietly.

Chako-sensei took a deep breath and got to her feet.

"A band!"

Right on cue, a pair of shelves slid into view from behind either side of Chako-sensei. Who installed these things, anyway? Where in this mid-sized room were they hiding? Is there even space in here for these things?

Chako-sensei was undeterred by the leaps of logic. She proudly stood with the shelves acting as her backdrop.

Upon the shelves were countless musical instruments. An electric guitar, an electric bass, a keyboard, a drum set, a theremin, a *koto*, a violin, a harp, a *shakuhachi*, a clarinet, a grand piano, castanets, a guitar, et cetera.

Anyway, there was a veritable museum's worth of instruments on the shelves. You could probably sell them for enough money to live off for the rest of your life.

"A band? As in, getting together in a group to play instruments?" Kino asked. She did not seem to care at all about the mysteriously appearing shelves.

"That's right! A band! In English, it's 'The Band'! Raise your voice and feel free to jump up and down! Don't you want to save the orphanage?" Chako-sensei asked. Kino ignored the question and shot back:

"But didn't we already try? And... we quit. Because... you weren't really a great singer."

Yes. Kino was right on the mark.

The Take Action Now Club's performance of [Allison] was sadly put to a stop after one of the walls were destroyed on the day of the festival. Afterwards, Chako-sensei poured her passion into the prospective of the club playing together as a band.

But Chako-sensei's Destroyer-class vocal skills were soon deemed a weapon of mass destruction, and was sealed away forever. Please refer to Gakuen Kino volume 2 for details.

"Yes... Our history has been marked with pain and sorrow." Chako-sensei said, tilting her head a full 43 degrees as she looked up at the ceiling.

Was our past really that grand, and was it really long enough to be called a history, Kino wondered. But she did not say anything.

"But we, the Take Action Now Club, have to move on from our tragic past. Unite our hearts and pave a new way forward. Do you understand, Kino?"

"Not one bit."

"Thank you. I knew you'd understand."

"Huh?"

"So let's sing together. With all our hearts! We'll form a band together and walk towards our brilliant future!"

"What?"

"Eventually, we'll fall apart due to musical differences. But we'll do it anyway! Otherwise, we wouldn't be much of a band, would we? Relationships like that are *false*!"

"Talk about prejudice..."

"But I think it's an interesting idea for the future." Shizu commented.

"So are we going to do it after all?" Asked Inuyama.

"We're going to form a band and practice hard together! And we'll let our souls sing with our instruments, to go out into the world!"

"Hmm..."

Kino fell into thought.

Chako-sensei's suggestion was relatively normal, compared to the play she had proposed out of nowhere earlier in the series.

But Kino did not understand why Chako-sensei decided to start up a band out of the blue. So she asked:

"But why a band?"

"Because it's all the rage these days!"

Kino tilted her head.

"It is?"

"Of course! Keep your eyes peeled and watch some late-night anime! It's being broadcast all over the country!"

"I don't watch television at all, much less anime."

"Then you'd better man up!"

"But I'm a girl."

"Then I'm just going to say this once. Starting last April, forming a band became the latest craze with these freethinkers who start with an 'O'. Instruments are selling like hotcakes! Instrument makers are rolling in cash! I could give you a video presentation with terms like 'Lefty' and 'Marching Band', if you want. It'll take about seven hours. Are you interested?"



"...No." Kino said finally, knowing that this particular teacher could very well follow up on her threats. After all, if she stayed behind, she would miss dinner at the dorms! Tonight's menu is a deep-fried oyster meal set!

"Then that's that! Let's divide up the parts, now. Shizu!"

"Yes?"

"You said you could play just about anything, right?"

"Well enough to meet your expectations, sensei."

This was only natural. Shizu trained alone to sing the songs that played in the background whenever he transformed into Samoyed Mask. A true singer-songwriter, if there ever was one.

There were rumors that he covered his face with a suspicious mask and uploaded videos of himself singing and playing the guitar and bass at the same time to an internet video site, raking in viewers with his unusual style.

"Then we'll start with Inuyama."

Chako-sensei turned to Inuyama and asked him if he had ever played an instrument before.

"Nothing in particular," Inuyama replied, "but I swear to master any instrument you teach me."

What a dependable answer.

"Then the problem is Kino." Chako-sensei said gravely.

Kino, having been labeled a problem—

"..."

Pouted slightly, despite knowing that Chako-sensei had hit the nail on the head. She was just competitive by nature.

"I think you'd do best on the guitar, Kino. You don't have to worry about the tougher melodies; just play chords in the back, and we could probably cover you."

Of course, Shizu agreed. Kino did not.

"But I've never even touched a guitar before! And... if I have to, could I just take vocals? I used to live in the countryside, so I always sang loudly back home. I think I could manage singing."

"That makes sense..." Shizu said quietly. But Chako-sensei stopped him.

"No. I don't mind you taking vocals. I was actually going to have the three of you all rotate singing parts, but you can just take it all, Kino. But I want *everyone* to be playing an instrument." She said, looking more serious than ever before.

Kino put on a look that almost matched Chako-sensei's in gravity.

"All right, then. But why?"

"Because it's cooler that way!" Chako-sensei grinned, poking out her tongue and winking.

"..."

Kino gave up, in more than one sense of the phrase.

Chako-sensei did not operate by human principles, she decided.

Now, the story continues.

First came Shizu's comment.

"Then I'll take the bass. What about you, sensei?"

"I'm going to pass on this one. Leave it to you young'uns." She said, suddenly acting like an old woman.

"Then I'll also act as band master. Inuyama, would you mind being the drummer? You seem to have an excellent sense of rhythm. I'm sure you'll do well." Shizu said with a smile.

"Sure." Inuyama said tersely. His eyes burned with the flames of vengeance.

Running through his head were not ideas on mastering the drum set, but plans to murder Shizu in the middle of the performance. He ran the simulations in his head.

The drummer's seat, located near the center and at the very back, was the ideal spot from which to ambush a fellow performer. Even Shizu's sense of caution was bound to grow lax during a performance. Inuyama could already think up seventeen different patterns of attack with a poison pin concealed in his drumsticks.

Whether or not he knew any of this, Shizu nodded to Inuyama.

"I'm counting on you."

He then turned to Kino.

"Kino."

When the exceedingly handsome Shizu looked her in the eye, Kino found herself smoothing out her clothes without even thinking.

"Y-yes!"

"I'm counting on you for the guitar."

"B-but I've never played..."

"That's all right. You only have to sing and play the right chords at the right time. It's not as complicated as it sounds. Of course, that doesn't exempt you from practicing. But we'll do

our best to help you. Relax and take it slowly, like you would for any other hobby you're taking up."

"Okay... I understand."

Kino had the feeling that she was totally detached from herself, dragged around by Chako-sensei and the Take Action Now Club despite her complaints.

"Sensei. I'd like for us to be able to perform a piece in public eventually, but the school festival is already over." Shizu pointed out.

"Thoughtful as always, Shizu! Good for you! And let me tell you a secret—I already have a place in mind!" Chako-sensei said, pulling out a piece of paper. She slammed it down on the desk. The three students looked down at it.

It was a poster advertising a battle of bands.

The poster, printed in full color, said something like this:

[A battle of bands for newcomers, hosted by the City of Yokohama!

Participants must be amateurs that have no ties to any record companies.

All music and lyrics must be original. Each band will be given up to nine minutes of performance time.

A local cable TV station will come to shoot the event. The concert will be broadcast on a music show that evening.

The concert will also be broadcast live over an internet streaming site!]

"L-live... over the internet?" Kino stammered.

Even our rock-dweller Kino knew what the internet was. She'd been using the computers at the school library recently to look up local challenge menus.

She had no idea what kind of music they were going to play, but once they entered this contest, their faces would be broadcast to the whole world. Live. No one could edit out their mistakes.

This event was on an entirely different scale from the play they performed last month. The internet is a scary place. Chako-sensei really meant it when she said, 'go out into the world'.

But.

"This is very exciting."

"This sounds excellent."

Neither Shizu nor Inuyama seemed to be perturbed in the least. Are you two brave, or just plain dense?

Kino desperately turned to Chako-sensei.

"B-but sensei! We can't go straight into something this tough... can we?"

"Better than something too easy, don't you think?"

Chako-sensei was being particularly merciless today.

Kino opened her mouth, deciding that she could no longer go along with this idea.

"You're right, but... I'd like to sit out on this one so I don't make us all look ba-"

"Wilt thou sup upon more cake?" Chako-sensei said, taking out yet another box of cake. 'Sup' is short for 'supping', and is an archaic word for 'eat'.

"Yes! By all means! ...Wait. It can't be!"

Kino's eyes lit up like stars for a moment, then quickly went dark.

"That's right, Kino. From this point forth, only students who are going to perform are allowed to eat this cake. Music is a lot of work, and you need lots of energy. It's just like how they serve gourmet food to special operatives and fighter pilots. As your supervising teacher, it's my responsibility to support my hardworking students as best I can."

"..."

Kino's eyes had become those of a beast stalking its next meal.

"Shizu, Inuyama. Go on and help yourselves! We have many difficult practice sessions ahead of us, so I need the two of you to be in tip-top shape. I'll make sure to bring a box of cake every time we meet up for practice. Anyone who plays gets to eat!"

"SCREW GUITAR! SCREW THE INTERNET! FINE, I'LL DO IT!" Kino howled.

"I don't believe this." Hermes said to himself.

Looks like *this* protagonist will never go through character development.

"This is delicious! The chocolate cake is almost as good!"

"I've never had such scrumptious chocolate cake, not even back in Belgium."

"It's an excellent culinary work. The cacao contained within chocolate (rest omitted)."

Yum, yum. The Take Action Now Club continued their discussion of the concert as they feasted on yet one more of many cakes today.

The battle of bands would take place in about two weeks' time, on the 3rd of November. It was Culture Day, a public holiday. Kino was shocked.

"That's way too soon! Aren't we supposed to get, like, six months of practice?!"

"We don't have time for that, Kino. Six months is enough time for a 26-episode anime to finish airing."

What is that comparison even supposed to mean?

Kino pointed out yet another shocking fact from the poster.

"Sensei, over here. It says we have to attach a recording of our performance if we want to sign up..."

"No worries! I already sent it in!"

"What? But how..."

"I asked some acquaintances of mine to lend me a hand! They're all talented people. They did their very best to make it sound like they were novices!"

Don't try this at home, kids.

Just to note, Chako-sensei had sent in this recording before the club members had even consented to the performance.

"..."

Despite her shock, Kino diligently downed mouthfuls of cake. The second box was soon emptied. The twenty-six pieces of cake were annihilated in less than three minutes.

"That's it for today's meeting! I actually wanted to start practice today, but I have some things to take care of this time." Chako-sensei said. Shizu stood up and spoke.

"What would you like for us to do, then? We won't have another meeting until Monday."

In response, Chako-sensei took out three portable music players from her bag and placed on in front of each member.

"The song I sent in as our demo is on these. I want you to make your own sheet music from this song. We have enough time for two performances, but one song's enough for now. Let's try and master it."

"Of course. Then I'll make the sheet music for all the parts by Monday after school." Shizu said. Chako-sensei nodded, and turned to Inuyama.

"Inuyama, practice with these."

Chako-sensei pulled from the shelf a thick textbook entitled [Even a Dog Can Play the Drums], an old pair of drumsticks, an old magazine, and a roll of duct tape.

How do you use these objects? You wrap up the old magazine in duct tape, then use it in place of a drum for practice purposes.

The fact that this is Gakuen Kino might dissuade you from believing this, but this is an actual practice technique people use. Drum sets are terribly expensive, and very loud. It's one of those instruments that are very difficult to practice, so many drummers are badly inconvenienced. This is why electronic drums exist.

"I'll make it so that you can practice here starting Monday, so I want you to learn the basics on your own over the weekend." Chako-sensei said.

"Understood." Inuyama said, receiving his gear and falling into thought again.

He had come up with yet more plans to defeat Shizu. He was already on his 108th simulation of bludgeoning him to death with the duct-taped magazine.

Now that Kino had agreed to take the guitar, she had no choice but to practice.

"What do I do?"

Kino was an expert when it came to firearms, but you'd be hard-pressed to get any coherent information about music out of her.

"I'll give you the details on Monday after school. But first..."

Chako-sensei reached into the shelf and pulled out a book titled [Basic Electric Guitar Studies for Military-and-Firearms Geeks - You, too, can play the guitar! Easy explanations using military jargon].

Looks like even Kino's going to be able to play now. Although I'm not sure if this book will ever make a profit.

"Now we need to find you a guitar," Chako-sensei said, "I would normally just tell you to run part-time jobs for one, since that sounds more like a plausible coming-of-age story, but we unfortunately have no time to spare."

She then chose one of the dozens of guitars on the shelf, and raised it into the air.

"Stratocaster!" She cried in the voice of a certain cat-shaped robot.

### **Gakuen Kino's Music and Instrument Corner - Part 1**

(Let me explain. In this corner, I'll give a quick summary on things about music and the instruments that make an appearance in this book. Just like the title says. If you're not interested, feel free to skip this section!)

The guitar Chako-sensei chose for Kino was a Stratocaster, made by the famous Fender USA.

The Fender Stratocaster is one of the top two electric guitars in the world, rivaling the Gibson Les Paul.

To explain further, this particular model Chako-sensei gave Kino was from the American Standard Series. It had a black body and a rosewood fretboard.

By the way, this is a totally new guitar. Purchased very recently.

The protective film with the name of the model was still stuck on the pick guard and the back of the body. It had not even been installed with a tremolo arm, a piece which makes the sounds reverberate.

End explanation.

Sure, Chako-sensei could talk like Dor\*\*mon all she wanted. But that didn't solve their problems.

"Hah..."

Kino knew nothing about guitars.

All she could tell from the one that Chako-sensei chose for her was that 'it's black, and it's an electric guitar'. If this was a gun, she could probably rattle off the model number, the caliber, and the year of manufacture in the blink of an eye.

Whether Chako-sensei was trying to gently encourage Kino or just didn't care (probably the latter):

"From this point on, this guitar is your partner! Master it well!" She said, handing the guitar to Kino as she would a rifle to a greenhorn soldier. Without so much as an explanation about guitars.

"I'll take it, I guess..."

Kino accepted the guitar for now, but she had no idea how to hold it, or how much force she could exert without breaking it. She carried it gingerly like a newborn baby, supporting it carefully, and gently laid it over her lap.

Six strings shone before her eyes. The thinnest of them looked rather like a string used by assassins to murder people. Wouldn't touching it shred her finger?

One by one, Chako-sensei handed her a hardshell guitar case, a gig bag for carrying it around on her shoulders, a guitar tuner, a pick, extra strings, a guitar stand, a strap, a pair of headphones for practicing quietly in the dorms, a micro-sized amp, and the other accessories she needed.

"Whoa..."

Soon, the desk in front of Kino was covered in a pile of guitar accessories.

As Chako-sensei and Shizu taught her the basics of holding a guitar and putting it into a case—

"Now that I think about it, since we're starting practice on Monday, I don't need to take the guitar back today, do I?" Kino wondered.

"You just don't understand how charming it is for a schoolgirl to walk home with a guitar case on her back!" Chako-sensei said, cheerfully ignoring Kino.

So they finished packing up, and the end of their club activity time came to an end (Editorial dept.: What does this even mean?). Chako-sensei finally left Kino with this command:

"Kino, I want you to listen to the song and write lyrics for it. The vocal part is the one the keyboard is playing. I'm going to give you until Monday."

"Whaaaaaat?! What do you mean?" Kino blurted without thinking.

"'Lyrics', Kino, are words that go to a musical piece..."

"I know that."

"Excellent."

"I don't know why you put on that serious look all of a sudden, sensei, but why do *I* have to make up the lyrics?!" Kino asked.

"That's because..."

I'm sure you're all wondering, what kind of improbably ridiculous answer was Chako-sensei going to give?

"It's because you're the only girl in the band, Kino. I want a real girl's feelings to fill this song. And you know, it'll be easier for you to sing the lyrics with real emotion if you've written them for yourself."

It was a surprisingly sensible answer.

"That's a wonderful idea."

"I have to agree."

Shizu and Inuyama nodded.

"..."

Kino gaped silently for a moment.

"Fine, but it's not my fault if you don't like how it turns out!" She spat, and turned away.

Carrying the guitar on her back like a real musician, Kino walked back to the dorms alongside Shizu and Inuyama, who were helping her carry her things.

"Hm..."

From inside the music prep room, Chako-sensei spread the blinds with her fingers, looking down on them with a grin. Just like a certain criminal investigation section chief from a certain police drama.

"Um... Kuroshima-sensei..."

A somewhat frail voice called to her from the darkened music room. It was the voice of a young girl.

Following this voice was one of a boy who had not yet reached puberty.

"Is this really okay? I'm starting to think we made too big of a request."

This voice sounded a little more energetic.

He sounded reluctant, but there was a very sincere desperation to the boy's tone.



Chako-sensei turned to the two people in the music room and smiled radiantly.

"There's no need to worry! Have faith in the Take Action Now Club." She said firmly.

Didn't she say the exact same thing in the last volume?

## **Chapter 7 - Part 2: Hear my song**

### **~The Band~**

Saturday. Cloudy.

Having only been liberated from club activities the previous evening, Kino spent the previous night lazing around instead of practicing for the Take Action Now Club.

But it occurred to her that she should probably start practicing soon, so after breakfast she went back to her room and began to read the textbook Chako-sensei had given her.

"Of course... 'Attach the strap to the guitar and hold it at waist-level. Your grip must be light, in the same way as when you provide support fire with a squad automatic weapon'."

She continued reading.

"'The guitar should be naturally tipped at a 45-degree angle, similar to the angle of firearms used by riflemen in wide-open patrol areas with a low risk of attack—for example, the rolling hills of Afghanistan'. I see, I see..."

She kept reading.

"'The pickup is the heart of an electric guitar. This is where the quality of the sound is determined, of similar importance to the breech cap and cycling mechanism of an automatic weapon'. I get it..."

Looks like this book was written for Kino. Although it probably means nothing to 99.9% of the world.

Kino read the book as she lay on her bed, as she sat at her desk, and sometimes as she held the Stratocaster. She studied the basics of guitar with surprising gusto.

When this protagonist puts her mind to things, she gets her job done. She has great focus, if nothing else. Unlike the author.

Sometimes, Kino came across terms that were so basic that they were not explained. In these cases, she turned to Hermes.

"Hermes, what's a 'broken chord'? It's also called an 'arpeggio' or something."

"It's when you play the notes in a chord one after another. So instead of a 'BAM', you'll get 'Ba-ba-ba-bam'."

Hermes gave Kino all the answers she asked for, probably because this wasn't her midterm.

And so, Kino spent the day cramming the most basic information on guitars into her mind.

The next day. Sunday. There was a light drizzle outside.

Kino would learn the specifics about playing the guitar tomorrow during club activities. But she still had one job to do.

"Hm... what to do..."

Kino listened to the song from the music player Chako-sensei had given her. She thought very hard with a mechanical pencil in hand, an open notebook in front of her on the desk.

Yes. The lyrics.

She was supposed to put lyrics to the song coming from the headphones.

The melody itself was, fortunately, upbeat and easy to sing. But trying to put lyrics to them was a different matter altogether.

First of all, Kino had no idea what theme she should sing about.

The few songs she knew were all about love, relationships, dating, passion, and heartbreak. Unfortunately, none of these things had anything to do with Kino.

"Hmm..."

Kino kicked her grey matter into high gear. Time passed, with Kino doing nothing but uselessly taking up oxygen from the Kanto area.

She thought, had lunch (with rice containing chestnuts, the perfect meal for autumn) and ate some snacks, but she came up with nothing.

Maybe she should do something else, and the lyrics would come to her naturally. Kino did fifty push-ups and sit-ups each, then did about three hundred rounds of shooting practice with her model gun. But it was all useless.

The sun was setting outside. It was almost time for dinner. Today's dinner menu was meatloaf with special gravy, with a side of mashed potatoes and Hokkaido corn. It sounded delicious.

"ARGH! I don't care anymore! I. GIVE. UP!" Kino cried.

Hermes, hanging from the belt on the wall, spoke.

"Why don't you just wing it? That's why four out of ten lyricists do anyway. Probably."

Whether Hermes was telling the truth or not, it was the kind of comment that might get him lynched by the lyricists of the world.

"But Hermes, I can't write up lyrics about something I don't know anything about..."

"Then how about something you're familiar with?"

"..."

Kino was silent.

She was thinking.

Soon, she opened her eyes with a glint and slammed her fist into her open palm.

"I've got it."

Kino sat at her desk. Her right hand began scribbling away furiously.

"I'll just write out stuff I thought about when I was little. Lalala♪... Lalala♪... Lalala♪..."

Kino, who had already memorized the melody, wrote out the lyrics to match.

She wrote and wrote, and sometimes rubbed it out with an eraser. She then wrote some more.

Ten minutes passed.

"Finished!" Kino said, raising the notebook into the air. Now she could make it to the cafeteria in time! Just you wait, meatloaf!

"That was quick. Let me see too!" Hermes pressed her.

"It's just one song, but I guess it'll do. My magnum opus!"

Kino showed the note to Hermes, who was hanging on the wall.

Hermes read its contents.

**Title: My Gun is a Hotchkiss**

**Lyrics: Kino**

**Music: Don't know**

Step over the past and future and raise a battle cry  
They call you a barbarian, and you're covered in blood  
But fight on with your comrades in arms  
You alone can enter battle, on behalf of those who can't  
Though humans are tragic creatures destined to fight forever  
Though this truth is played out for the ages  
We'd sooner mark ourselves for Hell than send our loved ones to Heaven today  
We march into the battlefield to protect their futures  
Now, soldiers, let us march  
Hold your heads high and walk side-by-side  
The gun you carry is the weight of all you must defend  
Remember and remember  
My gun is a Hotchkiss

'A war song?!' Hermes thought with a silent snicker.

This was not the work of your average schoolgirl. What kind of a childhood had Kino experienced? The lyrics were in perfect contrast to the upbeat melody of the song.

For your reference, the Hotchkiss mentioned in the lyrics refers to the Hotchkiss machine gun. The manufacturer is French, so it's only right to ignore the 'H' and pronounce it 'Otchkiss'.

The Hotchkiss was one of France's most prominent machine guns during the First World War. Even the Imperial Japanese Army licensed the design and mass-produced it to use as a supplementary weapon. I'm not lying!

"Awesome! This is great! I love it!"

Kino seemed to be quite happy with her work.

But maybe this was just the warm, fuzzy feeling of completing a difficult homework assignment, regardless of the quality of work.

But it was the perfect sort of feeling that would let her have dinner without a care.

"I don't believe this..."

Hermes couldn't help but worry about how badly Chako-sensei, Shizu, and Inuyama would take these lyrics tomorrow after school.

<=>

"Excellent work, Kino! We'll go with your lyrics!"

"Yes, they're quite good. There is a unique soul residing in these lyrics."

"I'm in full agreement."

Chako-sensei, Shizu, and Inuyama heaped praises on Kino's work.

'*Seriously?!'* Hermes wondered, his jaw dropping, but he said nothing.

"Ahaha..." Kino laughed, being surprisingly modest.

"The song is finally complete!" Chako-sensei cried, "Shizu even brought the sheet music for your practices. All you have to do now is practice until you drop!"

So practice began.

More specifically, they would first look at the sheet music Shizu had brought to decide upon the image they wanted to go with for the song.

Because Shizu could already do everything, he had already been practicing the bass.

"Let me give this a try." Shizu said, grabbing the bass guitar and the amp from the shelf.

## **Gakuen Kino's Music and Instrument Corner - Part 2**

The bass guitar looks similar to the electric guitar, but it is longer and thinner in shape. A guitar also has six strings, but bass guitars usually only have four (although some can have five or more).

Shizu's model of choice was the Bacchus(Note: A Japanese manufacturer) Handmade Standard model, in black. It was a wonderful match for his pristine white uniform.

An amp is a device that amplifies the sounds made by an electric instrument (such as an electric guitar, bass, or electric violin) so it produces sound through its speaker. You can make all kinds of adjustments with this baby, from volume control to distortion.

Studios use amplifiers that are the size of small refrigerators, but Shizu was using a smaller one because he was only practicing. Of course, it was still the size of a small suitcase.

End explanation.

Shizu plugged the amp into the outlet, connected it to the bass with a shielded cable, and switched on the power. He strummed on the bass strings with his right hand to test out the sound.

*Tng tng tng tng.*

Four low tones rumbled from the amp, sounding out notes that were each one octave lower than the third through sixth strings of the guitar. Looks like this bass doesn't need any tuning.

"Well then."

Shizu started the music on the cassette player and performed his part in time with the music.

*Tng tng tng tng. Tng tng tng tng tng tng. Tng tng tng.*

The bass rumbled pleasantly at low frequency. This is making me feel hungry.

Shizu continued to play the bass, at times closing his eyes to become the epitome of cool and stylish. The bass was a perfect match for his great height.

He soon completed playing his part of the song, all without a single mistake.

"Amazing! That was wonderful, Shizu!" Chako-sensei said, clapping her hands together. She then turned to the dour Inuyama.

"Shizu did so well that I wouldn't blame you or Kino if you couldn't outdo him. What do you say, Inuyama?"

"No, sensei! I'm sure that with enough practice, I will be able to do even better than Shizu! I'll train like my life depended on it!" Inuyama cried, baring his fangs. Chako-sensei was quite the manipulator.

"Then give it your best!"

Chako-sensei set up Inuyama's instruments.

It was a full electronic drum set, manufactured by the Roland Corporation.

### **Gakuen Kino's Music and Instrument Corner - Part 3**

The electronic drum set looks very much like a regular drum set, but it doesn't have real snares or cymbals or the like. The 'drums' are actually rubber pads or cloth equipped with sensors. When they are hit, the sound of the drums is expelled through the amp.

Inuyama took a seat.

The drum set was composed of a bass drum, a hi-hat, a snare drum, tom-toms, a floor tom, a crash cymbal, and a ride cymbal. Before his eyes were laid out all sorts of things to hit. By the way, you don't have to remember the names of all these drums to enjoy this novel. The author is just desperate to pad out the length of the book.

End explanation.

Inuyama received the drumsticks from Chako-sensei and started off by gingerly tapping on the snare drum.

*Tat tat tat tat tat tat.*

The bright beat of the snare filled the music prep room. Almost like a trained professional, Inuyama calmly began to increase his speed and tried out different rhythms.

*Thunk. Chk chk chk. Thunk.*

He stepped on the right pedal to sound the bass drum, and made small metallic sounds with the hi-hat.

It looked like two days of individual practice were enough to help him master the basics.

Chako-sensei then handed him the sheet music for the drum set that Shizu had made. Unlike sheet music for other instruments, this particular one indicated the rhythm at which Inuyama was supposed to hit specific parts of the set.

He slowly went over the timing for each drum.

"Wow... You're really amazing, Inuyama. We'll have this song mastered in no time!" Chako-sensei said with a satisfied grin.

So now there was just one problem left.

"Why're you all looking at me?"

And that was Kino, who had never played the guitar in her life.

<=>

"Phew..."

Kino returned to her room from the dormitory baths and flopped down on her bed.

She was currently dressed in her school gym uniform and a T-shirt. Over her chest were the words [Delayed Blowback!].

There was a towel wrapped around her head because her hair wasn't quite dry, but Kino didn't seem very inclined to get up anytime soon.

"You must be tired." Hermes said, hanging from the wall.

"So... sleepy... Burned it all... to white... ash..." Kino replied.

Today's club activities were more difficult, painful, and excruciating than ever before.

Setting the singing aside, Kino was given a very heavy crash course on the guitar. From tuning to fixing the strap, to using it and playing it.

"Otherwise, you'll never become a real marine!"

Chako-sensei was a truly merciless commanding officer.

"This is her first try with the guitar, sensei. Let's not be too harsh." Shizu said, taking Kino's side, but our superior was undeterred. Why don't you say anything about the 'marine' thing she just brought up, Shizu?

Chako-sensei furiously forced Kino to practice and furiously berated her.

"You're just like the Tokyo Sky Tree, standing up high!"

What does that even mean?

After several hours of concentrated guitar lessons, Kino returned to the dorms, exhausted. Although she *did* learn quite a bit during this period of training.

After dinner and a bath, Kino was already dead tired. She didn't even feel like studying.

"I can't believe... Two more weeks of this...?"

Without caring that she would probably wake up with a bird's nest for a head tomorrow, Kino fell asleep.

But Chako-sensei's training had been so strict that Kino had forgotten something:

Namely, that they had neither tea nor cake today during practice.

<=>

"Sensei! You didn't give us any cake yesterday!"

It was after school on Tuesday. It was only during lunch today that Kino realized this fact. So she stormed into the music prep room in anger! Fury! And outrage!

"Oh? Didn't I?" Chako-sensei asked nonchalantly, sitting in the prep room.



She was laying out a delicious cake on the table, with Shizu and Inuyama's help.

"No! But what's done is done. Forgive and forget, right?" Kino said quickly, her eyes trained on the cake.

"I think so too, Kino. Let's start with the cake today. We'll practice afterwards." Chako-sensei said.

"All right!"

Kino sounded completely refreshed.

*'Hook, line, and sinker. Huh.'* Hermes thought, but he said nothing.

Chako-sensei was probably only going to feed them tea and cake every other day. Sure, she brought the cake this time, but tomorrow—Wednesday—she'll have 'forgotten' to bring it. She would put everyone through such a rough practice session that Kino would forget this fact, and by the time Kino realized the lack of cake on Thursday, Chako-sensei would have it prepared once more.

And that was what really happened.

Time passed. It was Friday.

"I'm tired..."

Kino was lurching down the hill with the guitar slung behind her, heading for the dormitories.

Of course, she didn't get any cake today.

*"Put your soul into it!"* Chako-sensei had cried during practice, driving them so hard that Kino had no time to even think of food.

For your information, Kino had improved quite a bit over the past couple of days.

Two weeks was not nearly enough time for anyone to master an instrument. What Kino had to focus on learning first and foremost was getting the timing right to play power chords.

#### **Gakuen Kino's Music and Instrument Corner - Part 4**

A power chord is a chord consisting of the first and third from a three-note chord. Because you only need two notes, you only need to strum two strings that are right next to each other. Simple, isn't it? Not only that, you also only use the three strings at the top—six, five, and four. The thickest ones.

Holding down these strings is also a very simple task.

The part of the guitar where you press down on the strings is called a 'fretboard'. Not to be confused with riding a small, long mammal down a slope. The board is divided into 'frets',

which are marked by metal strips. Each section is numbered, with the section furthest from the body of the guitar being called the 'first fret'.

In terms of pianos, think of each fret as one key. Twelve frets make up a single octave.

You have to press down on many strings at a time if you want to play all the chords on guitar, but power chords are very simple.

Hold down the first note with your index finger, then use your ring finger to press down on the string directly below and two frets above—this point is the third.

'Hold down the first note with your index finger, then use your ring finger to press down on the string directly below and two frets above. Then play the strings'. This is all. There isn't even a major/minor distinction.

Let's try practicing. Press down on the third fret of the first string. Then use your ring finger to press down on the fifth fret of the fifth string.

Now strum!

That is the G power chord. Good job.

Try some more:

The fifth fret of the first string, and the seventh fret of the second string. This is the A power chord.

Then, the fifth fret of the second string and the seventh fret of the third string. This is the D power chord.

The fingering poses are all the same, so all you have to do is move them left, right, and up and down.

End explanation.

What Kino had to do was play a power chord at the beginning of each bar.

It was a relatively simple task, but it was still a difficult goal for a total beginner like Kino. So lured by the promise of cake, she poured blood and sweat into practice. And she hadn't even started on *singing* practice yet.

For your information, Inuyama plugged in a USB drive containing the song into the electronic drum set's control box, and was practicing with a pair of headphones clamped over his ears. *Thunk thunk thunk. Thunk thunk thunk thunk thunk.*

He was starting to sound convincingly skilled. But it was doubtful if anyone knew the fact that Inuyama was visualizing each drum to look like Shizu and Samoyed Mask's face.

Shizu, meanwhile, had brought in a white electric guitar, a Flying V (Note: an object that only appears to be capable of flight). He was playing through Kino's part at a snail's pace in order to help her along.

"Yes. Perfect timing."

*Bam.*

"Like this?"

*Bam.*

"That's right. Excellent."

*Ba-bam.*

"Oh, I see. Like this."

*Ba-ba-bam.*

The electronic sound leaking through the doors of the music prep room confused the students who passed by in the halls.

"What have they been doing all week?"

"Did our school even have a light music club?"

"The school festival's already over, though..."

"Did you notice? The music room's been dead quiet all week."

Actually, the school band that usually practiced in the music room had been relocated to the gymnasium stage early this week (where the Take Action Now Club had performed their play).

Currently, the gymnasium was filled with the passionate wail of trumpets, accompanied by the sound of volleyballs and basketballs bouncing to and fro. The members of the athletic teams were being driven up the wall.

"Sensei, can't we do something about this?" They complained to their supervising teachers.

"Let's try to get along for now. It'll only be two weeks." The teachers all said to their students, word-for-word.

Only some of the teachers knew of what Chako-sensei had secretly done to gain their cooperation.

Those teachers would probably take this secret to the grave.

<=>

The school was tinted red in the beautiful autumn sunlight.

And here was our terrifying Chako-sensei:

[It's all going according to plan.] She said from the driver's seat of a car in the school parking lot. She was talking on her cell phone to an unknown person. In English, at that.

The car was a new Honda hybrid sports car, the CR-Z. The chassis was sharp as a knife, and it was painted a bright red. Red is for passion.

Although the license plate indicated that the car was from Yokohama city, the fact that the number did not start with a [㍿]<sup>2</sup> indicated that this was not a rental car, like the one she had brought for the club's outings with Inid.

[Yes, that's right. Don't worry, now.]

Chako-sensei spoke in English, in a very gentle tone. The members of the Take Action Now Club have probably never heard her talking like this before.

[Just relax and rest up. You need to recover properly. And once the time comes, all your problems will be solved.]

What in the world was she talking about? This is all very suspicious.

As the person on the other side of the phone spoke, Chako-sensei nodded and agreed in English.

[Thanks for worrying about us. But it's going to be all right. I promise.]

Chako-sensei turned her gaze to the distance, through the sunroof and into the red-and-maroon skies.

[We'll use our skills to destroy any obstacle in our path. That's what it means to be part of the Take Action Now Club.]

Chako-sensei grinned coolly.

[I want you to take a good look at the way we warriors of justice fight. From all the way across the sea!]

<=>

The next day. It was a Sunday, and the Take Action Now Club was not meeting today.

Cold autumn rain poured down onto the streets. It was cold, and with each shower the season inescapably drew nearer and nearer to winter. Although it would be terrible if the seasons suddenly started going backwards.

Kino was hoping to at least take a break from practice during her one day off. So she was lazing around in the common room, reading a magazine.

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in the previous volume, the character (㍿) is only present on the license plates of rental cars.

There were about eight students in the common room today. They were all dressed in gym uniforms, sprawled on the couches like those lethargic white bears you see in zoos in the middle of summer.

"You all look so tired. Are you just going to lay around until feeding time?" Sato-senpai said, stepping into the room.

She was once again holding the Blu-ray of the Anete Harami Yokohama concert. She must have watched it over and over again by now.

Sato inserted the disk into the player. The bears in gym uniforms stirred and sat up one by one to watch the concert. Some took a quick minute to go to the washroom, or went to buy juice. I can use commas and clauses all day long.

Kino, who really wasn't interested, kept her eyes on her magazine.

"Sato, did you hear?"

"About what?"

Kino could hear someone talking to Sato. A girl in the same year, most likely.

"You know how Anete hasn't shown up on TV recently, right?"

"Oh, yeah. She put up an apology on her homepage. It's just a cold, right?" Sato sighed.

"No, no. People are saying it's actually pretty bad."

"Wh-what?!" Sato raised her voice.

"..."

Kino looked up from her magazine.

Sato stopped in the middle of bringing the disk to the tray and glared daggers at her friend.

Her friend looked a little taken aback.

"It's just a rumor, Sato. Don't worry about it too much. The thing is, it's been three weeks since she came on TV or radio. And she hasn't posted on her blog or tweeted anything."

"Yeah, but..."

"Isn't that a bit long for a cold? There haven't been any new announcements, either."

"But that doesn't mean she's in a bad spot, right?"

"And someone posted on an internet forum yesterday, saying they saw Anete Harami overseas. Some city with that famous clinic—Maya? Mayor? What was it, now? Anyway, there's rumors that she has a really serious illness and she's recuperating in America."

"...You've gotta be kidding..." Sato trailed off, on the verge of tears. Her friend desperately tried to console her.

"H-hey! It's just a rumor, Sato. People are probably just blowing things out of proportion. C'mon. She'll be back on stage before you can say 'gee, whiz'!"

What time period is this girl from?

"You're right. Right. Right! Everyone has to take breaks. Even Anete Harami!"

Sato perked up once more and placed the disk in the tray, and began to watch the concert again.

Everyone began to enjoy the sights and sounds.

Kino, who listened to the music as she read the magazine—

"Huh?"

Noticed something strange.

"Whoa..."

She could hear the sound of the guitar much more clearly than before.

<=>

Monday, after school. The sky was clear.

"Sensei! I can stuff myself full of cake today, right?!"

Is that the first thing you say as soon as you start the first practice of the week, Kino? Are you sure you're human?

"You betcha!"

Chako-sensei came prepared.

Eep! Kino's tail began wagging. She looked like an overexcited puppy. Club Activities LOVE!

"Yeah! That hits the spot!"

Once again, she downed nearly a dozen slices of cake and a liter of tea. Kino began practice, supremely satisfied.

"We only have a week and a little bit left until the big day," Chako-sensei said, "so we're moving on to Phase II."

It was a very cool name for a plan, but it essentially meant that they were now going to start singing practice.

Chako-sensei suggested that they begin by attempting to sing.

They had recorded themselves playing the song last Friday. Preparations to play the recording through the speakers were complete.

They had already set up the mic and the mic stand. They connected it to the amp. One, two, testing, one, two. All right.

"It's time for the vocals, now! Featuring our very own Kino! And of course, the song will be this year's mega-hit—[My Gun is a Hotchkiss]!"

I wonder if anyone could sing proudly after an embarrassing intro like that. Only the best of the best. But wait, was this song ever a mega-hit?

"W-wait, I beseech thee!" Kino cried, shaking her head. What a strange protagonist, slipping into historical drama whenever she feels like it.

"Could you give me some time to practice?"

Chako-sensei, who had been acting like an emcee from a music show, nodded and agreed.

"Then how about we all go for singing practice together?"

Where? The club members looked at her curiously.

"Let's go for some karaoke!"

Karaoke.

Karaoke is karaoke in English, too.

Thanks to the widespread usage of cell phones and the internet, young people have mostly stopped going out for karaoke. But it is still one of Japan's foremost forms of entertainment.

Other forms of entertainment representative of Japan are pachinko, whaling, watching pervy anime, and toilets equipped with bidets (data gathered from foreign research).

Anyway, it was still the middle of the day, and the karaoke boxes were empty. The three club members and Chako-sensei had a large room (seating capacity: 20) all to themselves. They had couches left over, so everyone sat very far from one another. They had so much room that they could probably sleep on the couches.

Chako-sensei ordered beverages for everyone through the intercom and asked:

"So, what's the first thing we do before we practice?"

Shizu was the first to answer.

"Before partaking in physical exercise, it is imperative that one starts off with warm-ups. This also applies to singing."

"Perfect answer, Shizu! I expected nothing less from you!" Chako-sensei said. Shizu even got the usage of 'imperative' right. This is a word that means 'necessary'. But don't go around defining it to everyone you meet, or they'll just call you an annoying know-it-all.

So let's begin with warm-ups.

In your seat, lean your upper body forward at a very slight angle. Then take deep breaths and release.

Then, put pressure in your gut to make it stick out. Maintain that position as you breathe out. One more time! A long, thin breath.

Kino had no idea what any of this was supposed to be, but she followed Chako-sensei's instructions.

"Next, we'll practice voice projection! Straighten our your backs and repeat after me.  
'*Amenbo akai na, a e i o u*'!"

"*Amenbo akai na, a e i o u*" The students repeated.

"*Ukimo ni koebi mo oyoideru*'!"

"*Ukimo ni koebi mo oyoideru*'!"

They went on with '*Kaki no ki kuri no ki ka ki ku ke ko, kitsutsuki kotsu kotsu kare keyaki*', but it might eat up too many pages if I go on with this, so I'll omit the rest.

This is actually a poem called 'The Water Strider's Song', written by the Japanese writer Hakushū Kitahara.

With '*uekiya idoga e omatsuri da*', they finished their warm-up.<sup>3</sup> The young man working part-time at the karaoke place brought everyone their beverages with an incredulous expression. I don't blame him.

"All right then! Let's get to practicing!"

Chako-sensei was very excited.

"I'll start us off!" She cried, grabbing the microphone. But at that moment—

"If you could please stick to supervising us, sensei!"

"We'll do the singing, so please just listen, sensei!"

"Don't sing, sensei! You have to *teach* us!"

"Don't sing, sensei! You'll destroy our eardrums!"

Shizu, Inuyama, Kino, and Hermes cried at once. They all meant the same things, though. No one would want to hear nails on a chalkboard, amplified through an extremely high-quality karaoke sound system. It was an act of risking one's very life.

"Oh? If you say so..."

Chako-sensei looked a little disappointed, but there was nothing to be done. The moment she put down the mic,

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<sup>3</sup> Because this poem includes every sound present in the Japanese language, it is frequently used as an enunciation exercise.



"Phew..." "Phew..." "Phew..." "Phew..."

The three people and the cell phone strap all sighed in relief. Looks like no one paid any attention to what Hermes said.

"Then the three of you have to sing your hearts out! You need guts to stand on a stage. Step forward and imagine the world's eyes on you! Be sexy! Be cool! And I'm going to keep the scoring function on, so keep your competition in mind!" Chako-sensei commanded, sipping ginger ale through a straw.

"Then let me begin." Shizu said, pressing buttons on the remote control. He then started the song. It was a very serious, down-to-earth ballad.

Shizu took the mic and stepped onto the stage. He bowed.

His beautiful voice began to echo through the speakers.

The handsome Shizu's dandy voice was a perfect fit for the song he had chosen. He gently sang a bittersweet song about the events of a man's life.

"As usual, I expected nothing less." Chako-sensei said between slurps of ginger ale. Inuyama looked very resentful. He began fiddling with the remote as he searched for songs, silently claiming the next place in line.

Kino sipped her warm jasmine tea and thought to herself:

Was it actually imperative that she sing on stage and write the lyrics by herself? No.

How long did it take you to figure that out, Kino?

Shizu's sexy voice finally closed off the song.

The score screen flashed onto the monitor.

*Ratatatatat.* There was a dramatic drum roll, and then a crash of cymbals. *Crash!* The score was a whopping ninety-six points.

Kino had never received a score like this on any of her exams.

"Scores that high really do exist, huh? And here I was, thinking it was just an urban legend." She said honestly, holding her cup of jasmine tea. What a tearjerking thought.

Inuyama, meanwhile, silently ground his teeth.

"Great work, Shizu! I knew you could do it!" Chako-sensei said, applauding. Kino and Inuyama found themselves mimicking her before they knew it.

"Thank you. It's actually been quite some time since I last sang, but it was a wonderful experience all the same."

Shizu casually returned to his seat.

"I'll go next." Inuyama said, desperately clinging to discipline, as he took hold of another microphone.

The song began. It was rock. It was also all in English. The title, the names of the composer and the lyricist. All of it. In other words, a foreign song.

Inuyama took a very deep breath and sang to the upbeat tune.

No one could ever expect such a powerful voice from the normally quiet Inuyama. He sang in rapid-fire English, perfectly in time with the furious beat.

"..."

Kino was left slack-jawed by Inuyama's unusual display of emotion and the lyrics that made no sense to her.

"Ah." "Hm."

Shizu and Chako-sensei listened contentedly, with a slight hint of condescension.

Inuyama had reached the chorus. He began to belt it out, sweating furiously.

Kino had no idea that the lyrics at this point were "This is revenge, I'll kill you! This is revenge, I'll kill you! This is revenge, I'll kill you!". Well, I guess ignorance is bliss.

*Ta-dah.* The song came to an end.

Inuyama clasped his hands over his chest, as though in prayer, and tightly gripped his mic as he looked up at the Bose speakers on the ceiling. Something was dribbling from his eye—was it sweat, or tears?

"Amazing, Inuyama! Good work!"

"Excellent job."

But he did not hear these compliments.

Inuyama lightly shook his head and stared into the monitor. Here comes the drum roll...

And...

His score was...

Ninety-six points! Exactly the same as Shizu. No more, no less!

The karaoke machine must have learned to read Inuyama's emotions, not wanting to be destroyed by his outrage. Excellent work.

"Urgh!?"

Inuyama furiously glared at the screen, holding the microphone tight enough to break it.

But staring wouldn't do much to change the numbers on the screen. In the end, Inuyama returned to his seat and sipped his bitter iced coffee.

"And finally, it's Kino's turn!" Chako-sensei said.

"Uhh..."

She couldn't run now. Kino chose a song with the remote.

She stood up and stepped up to the stage while the prelude was playing.

She took a deep breath and began to sing.

It was...

A laid-back...

But upbeat...

And gentle song.

"Oh." "Ah." "..."

Kino did not notice the others' expressions changing.

Once she began, she continued without stumbling once. Kino melded into the world of the song, as though there was nothing around her.

Eventually, the song came to an end.

The music faded out.

"Brava!" Chako-sensei cried suddenly, applauding loudly enough to wake the dead.

The word 'brava' means the same thing as 'bravo', but is used when the performer is female. This is how they do things back in Italy.

"That was splendid, Kino! I've never heard anyone sing so well!" Chako-sensei said. This sounds strangely familiar. Where have I heard this line before?

And, of course, what was her score?

The couch Kino was sitting on had suddenly turned into 'Kiss and Cry John'.

Drum roll! And fanfare!

To everyone's shock, the score was a whopping—

Ninety nine!

Not only had Kino surpassed the others, she was also only a single point away from perfection. She wins with a personal best score! Take the gold medal already! Congratulations!

"Astounding!"

"That was great!"

Shizu and Inuyama praised her.

"Wha...?"

Kino was the one most shocked by this development.

She had never received a score like this in her entire life. If she had brought her camera, she would have taken a picture of the screen, printed it in poster size, slept beside it once, and then mounted it on a frame to put on her wall forever.

She was so floored that she couldn't even react properly.

"Uh... thank you." She said, scratching the back of her head.

Chako-sensei looked very pleased.

"Now that we know who's the best singer in here, I'll turn off the scoring function! Let's eat, drink, and make merry as long as we're here. You know, this place serves some great dessert!"

"That sounds wonderful," Shizu agreed.

"I'm not sure. Could we finish up for today?" Inuyama asked.

"Food please!" Kino cried, her eyes lighting up.

'*After all that cake?!*' Hermes thought, astonished.

The Take Action Now Club spent the next four hours eating, drinking, and singing.

By the way, Chako-sensei.

"What is it?"

Did you by any chance meddle with the scoring function?

"Nope. Not one bit. It was all Kino. I swear!"

That's what she said.

<=>

Tuesday after school. They finally began practicing like a real band.

In music, rhythm is key.

Inuyama on the drums and Shizu on the bass. *Futari wa Rhythm Max Heart*.

These two would set the rhythm in place as Kino played the guitar and sang.

"Then let's give it a try!" Chako-sensei said, kicking off practice.

Kino was desperate.

"Um... Up next is A... and then a D..."

At the beginning of each bar, she played a power chord.

"It's time for the vocal part, now! One, two, three!" Chako-sensei called.

"Step over the past and future~♪ and raise a battle cry~♪"

She's really good. Her karaoke score isn't such a shock anymore.

It looks like last week's hellish training sessions also paid off. Although she missed some of the chords in several places, Kino continued singing and playing without any horrible mistakes.

And—

"My gun~♪ is a Hotchkiss~♪"

*Dundundundundun. Bam!* End song.

"Excellent job! Not bad for a first runthrough." Chako-sensei said, applauding.

"..."

Released from the pressure of singing and playing the guitar, Kino turned her slightly sweaty head to her side.

"You did well."

The ever-handsome Shizu was smiling, holding the bass.

"Great work."

Inuyama, not looking very likely to sweat despite his intense performance, grinned.

"..."

Kino felt slightly ashamed of herself.

I don't belong in a band, she had thought. I don't enjoy music, she had told herself.

But now she felt ashamed for having ever thought that way.

"Can we... try that one more time?" She asked.

*'Did we just change genres to a coming-of-age drama?!'* Hermes wondered.

He kept quiet, however, and remained hanging from Kino's belt as she began to sing again.

"Later, everyone!" Kino said at the end of practice, stepping out of the music prep room with the gig bag containing the Stratocaster on her back.

"See you tomorrow!" Chako-sensei said with a wave. She smirked.

She stood by the window, watching Kino disappear from the school grounds as the orange sunlight illuminated the world.

"You two." She said to Shizu and Inuyama, who were both also preparing to leave.

Inuyama was just moving the drum set over to a corner of the room. Shizu was in the middle of transferring the recording they made today into Chako-sensei's laptop.

They both turned towards Chako-sensei. She took out two sets of sheet music from a binder and handed it to them.

"I want you two to practice these songs at home. I know you're both skilled enough to master it in no time."

"This is..." "What is this...?" Shizu and Inuyama mumbled simultaneously, looking down at the sheet music. Chako-sensei flashed them a wink.

"Don't ask. And not a word to anyone, okay? Not even Kino."

<=>

Time flies when you're focusing hard on something.

The Take Action Now Club practiced very hard all week long.

Thankfully, no one fell to demonic temptation during this time. The students here are just way too savvy to fall for them anymore.

After class every day, Kino would go to the music prep room and practice guitar. Every other day she would also get to stuff herself full of scrumptious cake.

Shizu and Inuyama were also reliable bandmates to Kino, supporting her from behind. Chako-sensei crossed her arms contentedly, listening to them play.

"Amazing... I never expected so much from your first song..." She gasped. "Good work, Kino. We'll take care of the rest, so you can go ahead and leave."

Sending Kino away, Chako-sensei, Shizu, and Inuyama lowered the volumes on the amplifiers to their absolute minimum and began practicing another song.

<=>

That evening, Kino wrote a letter to her grandmother in Hokkaido.

Dear Grandma,

How are you? I'm doing fine.

It's getting a little chilly here, but I'm sure it's already freezing back in Hokkaido. But you know, I'm not worried about you at all, Grandma. After all, no grandmother looks better in camo gear than you!

You know, I have some news that's going to knock your socks off!

I joined a band, and we're going to make our international debut! Actually, it's just a battle of bands at the local community center. But they're going to broadcast it all over the internet.

But it's still going to show all over the world! Isn't it amazing? I was kind of nervous about it at first, but our supervising teacher really convinced me with her energy and passion.

Now I'm playing an electric guitar for the first time in my life. I'm also the lead singer. You've met the other members before—Shizu-senpai and Inuyama.

You can watch us perform on Culture Day, at around one in the afternoon.

I've only ever used the internet at school, so I'm not sure if you'll be able to watch it or not. But I'm giving you early notice just in case.

The title is [Yokohama City Battle of the Newbie Bands]. Even if you can't see it live, I'll send you the video later. So look forward to it, okay?

I'll do my best!

Love, Kino

<=>

An old woman was reading a letter.

The late-autumn skies in Hokkaido were beautiful.

The reds and yellows of the trees had already disappeared, and winter was just around the corner. A traditional Japanese-style house stood alone in the woods.

An elderly woman, tall and standing upright with her long, silver hair in a bun, stood before the door as she read Kino's letter. It was written on a cute piece of stationary decorated with a drawing of a 9mm Parabellum round.

The old woman was wearing a green combat suit.

Slung over her back was an SR-25, a semi-automatic sniper rifle manufactured by Knight's Armament Company. It was a bit difficult to see, but there was a warning carved on the stock indicating that this particular gun was still a Japanese Self-Defense Force prototype. It looks like this woman was entrusted with testing the self-defense capabilities of this firearm.

"Oh my! The internet? What should I do?!"

The woman excitedly took off her combat boots, set her SR-25 against a gun rack, and stepped inside.

She entered a traditional *tatami* room that contained nothing but a single seat cushion. She snapped her fingers.

Part of the ceiling slid open without a sound. Something descended to the floor.

It was a table equipped with several computer monitors and three keyboards. The machinery appeared silently, like something straight out of a secret military base, and stopped just a couple dozen centimeters short of the floor.

"There."

The old woman brought the seat cushion from the corner of the room and set it down before the table. As if on cue, the screens flickered on automatically.

Filling the screens were countless forms of communication. Email, Twitter, blogs, and others. Their contents consisted of things like:

[Colonel Granny: We wish to request your aid for a mission. The pay is three million dollars for three days' work, negotiable.]

[We wish to hire you as an instructor at our academy for special operatives. We will pay you whatever you request.]

[Selling a V-13 tractor]

[Do you have enough firewood this year? Make sure to chop that wood before snowfall! When driving at night, please exercise caution so as to avoid hitting deer or other wildlife that may wander out into the road.]

[To celebrate your great contribution to our nation, we would like to name a street in our capital after you. Please tell us your real name!]

[When *will* you accept your medal? -From the Government of the United States of America.]

These messages were written in languages from all over the world.

The old woman ignored them all. She lightly waved her fingers in midair to change the screen, and began to surf the internet.

Soon, she arrived at a popular news site infamous for its gossip section.

The headline read:

[The Truth: Rumors of Anete Harami's Illness]



The second of November. It was a school day.

Tomorrow was Culture Day, a national holiday. It was already so very close.

The Take Action Now Club had finished their final practice early, so everyone was now partaking in cake.

"I honestly didn't think we'd be doing so well. I'm so proud of you guys!" Chako-sensei said energetically.

"Even I was shocked by how quickly Kino improved." Shizu said, also complimenting Kino. Inuyama agreed.

"I'm sure our performance tomorrow will be amazing."

As for Kino—

"This new Montblanc cake is out of this world! Chestnuts really are perfect in autumn. One more slice, please!"

She was focusing on the cake. And nothing else. Well, at least she's practiced diligently.

"Come to think of it, sensei..." Shizu said, "we still haven't decided on the costumes we should wear on stage tomorrow. Do you have anything in mind?"

Chako-sensei began to skim the top of her cup pudding as she answered.

"Nothing in particular. Why don't you just dress comfortably? There's no dress code or anything. And if you'd like, you can even change outfits midway through!"

Hey, these people are playing *one song*. When are they going to change? In the middle of the performance?

"Understood." Shizu nodded. Right. This guy's more than creepy enough to pull something like that.

"Wouldn't our uniforms be the best choice?" Inuyama wondered, "they're comfortable for us, and we could even use the fact that we are students to make a bigger impression on the audience."

It sounded like a very sensible suggestion, but Inuyama was only saying this because he wanted to see Shizu's pristine white uniform become stained red with something other than tomato juice for once.

Whether she knew what Inuyama was thinking or not—

"That sounds fine to me." Chako-sensei said. She then turned to ask Kino for her opinion.

"Sure. Can I have another slice of cheesecake?"

On the way back to the dorms.

Kino left the guitar back in the music prep room because they wanted to move all of their gear together tomorrow. So she was only carrying her beige messenger bag, although she was still wearing her belt and holster.

"I can't believe it's already tomorrow! You know, I was really anxious about all this when I first started." Kino said, having made sure that no one was around to hear.

But Hermes, hanging from her belt, said nothing.

"Huh?"

Kino looked down and felt with her hands to make sure Hermes was where he was supposed to be. Yes, Hermes the cell phone strap was still safely hanging from her belt.

"Hermes...?"

Kino stopped in her tracks and frowned.

"No way..."

A shadow of fear was cast over her eyes.

"Does this mean... Hermes went back to his magical world? And that's why he can't talk anymore? ...So I'm back to being an ordinary high school student?! Does this mean Gakuen Kino is going to be a normal high school romantic comedy from here on out?!"

"Don't worry. That's never going to happen." Hermes breathed. (Editorial dept.: Hermes *breathed?*)

"Oh."

Kino continued walking.

"That's cold of you, Kino. Anyway, there's something that's been bugging me for a while."

"Really? Like a cute female cell phone strap in our class or something? All right, you have my permission to leave on a date."

Hermes ignored Kino's joke.

"Kino, this school's been under surveillance for the past few days—no, the past two weeks." He said suddenly.

Kino frowned.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Exactly what I said. There's a bunch of people keeping watch on the school from the outside. From apartment windows and cars parked nearby. And from the woods."

"Maybe it's because of the demons. Wasn't there that government organization? KAERE or something?"

"No. It's definitely almost as well-funded, but I don't think it's government-related. It's probably a civilian group, but it doesn't look like a PMSC, either. They don't look like they're used to this kind of work at all. We can't make any rash moves since we don't know what they're after, but I want you to keep an eye out just in case."

"Hm..."

Kino slowly continued walking, falling into thought.

'PMSC' stands for 'Private Military and Security Companies'. Until not too long ago, they were known as 'PMC'. The dangerous-looking men who tried to kidnap Inid were from this kind of organization.

Although this was a different group, it was still keeping the school under tight scrutiny.

"I don't like this one bit." Kino said, her eye glinting with the wrath of a fierce warrior.

"I'm not going to let *anyone* steal my cake."

No one is *trying* to steal your cake.

You'll find out what these people are after. Tomorrow.

## **Chapter 7 - Part 3: This is How a Warrior of Justice Fights**

### **~The Role~**

Culture Day.

This day was made a national holiday in commemoration of the announcement of the Constitution of Japan on November 3rd, 1946. As you probably already know, the Constitution came into effect on May 3rd, 1947, which today is celebrated as the Constitution Memorial Day.

This day is also famous for the strange weather phenomenon it is predisposed to: namely, that the third of November in Japan always seems to be particularly sunny and clear.

"As usual."

Kino looked up at the sky from the window of her dormitory room. There was not a single cloud in the sky. I'm sure the Iruma district in Saitama Prefecture must be experiencing the same beautiful weather, too.

The Take Action Now Club was to meet up at the school by 8:53 in the morning. Kino woke up earlier than she usually did on holidays and had breakfast at the dorms. The student cafeteria was deserted. Remember, breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

Kino then returned to her room and fell into thought. What did she have to prepare today?

"She said to wear my school uniform, so I guess I don't have to do anything special."

In the end, she stepped out of the dorms dressed no differently than any other day, with her belt and holster and her slightly-messier-than-usual hair.

Kino climbed the slope to the school building. The path was deserted.

"I'm getting butterflies in my stomach." Kino said.

"Don't people usually feel like that on the night *before*, not the morning of? Just play and sing like you normally do. You sound good enough to perform, at least."

"Thanks. So, how about that thing we talked about before?"

Hermes understood what Kino was talking about.

"They're still watching the school. There's someone in the woods with a telescope in the ten o'clock direction, four hundred meters ahead. There's someone with a scope-equipped camcorder in an apartment building in the four o'clock direction."

"They're even keeping watch on a holiday... What are they thinking?"

Although she felt very much like beating these mysterious people to a pulp, Kino ignored them for the moment and headed for the music prep room.

She arrived a little earlier than scheduled.

"Good morning!"

"Hello, Kino."

"Good morning."

Chako-sensei, Shizu, and Inuyama were already there. Chako-sensei was just unlocking the door, which probably meant that they had gotten there not too long ago.

"Good morning. Hm?"

Kino noticed two students in uniform standing beside the usual members.

One of them was a girl. She looked very delicate and was quite small, but from the color of her indoor shoes Kino could tell that she was in her first year at the academy. Her reddish-black hair was tied into a pair of braided pigtails. Her cheeks were freckled. She looked innocent if you put it nicely, and homely if you didn't.

The other was a boy. A caucasian. That was nothing unusual, since there were many exchange students attending the academy. He had slightly frizzy golden hair and looked a little fainthearted. But he looked handsome enough that he could be popular with girls of his own age if he carried himself with a bit more confidence.

The boy was also quite small and skinny. He was about the same height as the girl, and his indoor shoes were also the same color as hers.

They looked up at Kino.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

They greeted her simultaneously, equally anxious, and lightly bowed their heads.

"Hello. Um, so who are you?"

Kino's question was answered by Chako-sensei.

"The girl here is Sara, and the boy is Elias. Just to let you know, they're not exchange students—they both grew up in Japan since they were young. Sara, Elias, this here is Kino. She's our guitarist and vocalist, and she's also our ultimate weapon. Our trump card!"

"...Right. Nice to meet you."

Despite being showered with compliments, Kino greeted the younger students a bit awkwardly.

"Since we're all here, let's get started moving all our gear!"

"Sensei! Are these two coming along too?" Kino asked.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?"

"I don't think you did."

"These two are first-years in the junior high department. They're also my students."

*'As if I couldn't figure that out,'* Kino thought, but she said nothing and waited for Chako-sensei to continue.

"They said they were curious about the band. It's too dangerous to let junior high students join the Take Action Now Club, but I thought it might be all right for them to come watch our performance since it's outside of school."

The moment she heard this, Kino realized something. A small storm brewed in her mind.

"Oh. I see..." She said quietly, slightly downcast at the realization, but Chako-sensei spoke up quickly as though she had read Kino's mind.

"There's nothing to worry about, Kino. Since we have two more mouths to feed, I've packed us even more food and dessert!"

"I'm fine now!" Kino cried, perking up instantly. Seriously? Thinking of fighting over food with a couple of kids three years young than you? You're a terrible protagonist, Kino.

"Let's do our best together!" Kino said cheerfully. Sara and Elias exchanged glances.

"Okay..." "Okay..." They said softly.

They carried the guitar, the bass, and the rest of their gear—mostly the stuff they needed for drinking delicious tea—into the parking lot.

Kino carried her guitar and a backup, and Shizu did the same with two basses. But—

"This is heavy..."

"Oh..."

Sara and Elias, in charge of carrying the tea pots and plates, were already staggering under the rather trivial weight.

Setting Sara aside, Elias was quite frail for a boy. If these two were to join the Take Action Now Club, they wouldn't last three days, Kino thought to herself.

As the two younger members hobbled into the parking lot, the others began to load the gear onto the back of the car Chako-sensei had rented—a Honda Odyssey Minivan, just like the one she got last time.

Because the guitars and basses were quite bulky, especially in their hard cases, the back row of seats was rendered unusable.

Shizu, who already had a driver's license because he was eighteen years old, drove the Odyssey. Kino sat beside him, and Inuyama and Elias behind them.

Chako-sensei and Sara were on the CR-Z, which had seats in the back but was too compact to fit any more people.

The two cars drove out of the school gates. Mission Start.

"They're moving! The target is on the move!" The man watching them from afar cried, and began to dial a number on his phone.

"After them! Confirm their destination and prepare to move out!"

Mission Start for you, too.

The CR-Z continued down the road.

"Don't worry!" Chako-sensei said with a smile.

<=>

The cars made their way down the busy holiday streets.

About ten minutes after leaving the school, they made it to the location described on the poster.

It was a community center on top of a small mountain, next to a large park. It was surrounded by forest, parkland, and parking lots. The scenery was gorgeous.

Because the center had recently been renovated, it was still quite shiny and new. The beautiful, wholesome building smiled down upon the people under the bright autumn sky.

The two cars carrying the Take Action Now Club drove up the mountain and stopped in the parking lot. There weren't many cars here yet, so they parked side-by-side and began to unload their gear.

"Oh, here. I'll take that." Kino said to Sara and Elias, as she slung one guitar case behind her and took hold of another in her hand. With her remaining free hand, she grabbed a large basket and began to walk towards the center.

"..."

Elias glanced at Sara with a melancholy look. Sara met his gaze.

"Our senpai is really amazing, isn't she?" She said innocently.

But her words only cast a shadow over Elias's eyes as he stood there helplessly.

Meanwhile.

The man who followed after Kino and the others by car saw the Take Action Now Club bring their things into the community center. He also saw the sign hanging over the entrance.

[Yokohama City Battle of the Newbie Bands! Broadcast live over the internet!]

The words passed through the man's eyes and into his brain, where they began to wreak all kinds of havoc.

"Th-that's... Ah..."

The shock was so great that he lost consciousness for several seconds. And the moment he came to his sense, he quickly made a phone call.

"I-it's me! All personnel, abandon your posts and head to the Yokohama community center immediately! This is terrible!"

<=>

It was halfway to noon. The community center began to fill up with people.

The parking lot was also filled with vans and trucks. People energetically unloaded their instruments and gear, lending an air of cheer to the atmosphere.

Everyone was here for today's battle of bands. The passionate love of music and the musicians' hopes of playing to the whole world burned under the sky.

Some of the participants were quite young, and others were middle-aged men. The instruments were just as varied, ranging from electric guitars to accordions.

The participants who had already registered had to enter the community center and remain on standby inside a very large waiting room. Because there weren't enough rooms to assign one for each group, the entire group of performers were allotted a total of two rooms: One large waiting room and a prep room for the female participants.

Everyone began to get ready. Some got into character. Others put on makeup or changed into their costumes.

There were eight groups in total participating today.

The order of their performances was to be decided by drawing lots. The rehearsal would take place in the reverse order. In other words, the band that performed first would have rehearsed last. This was because this arrangement spared the crew from having to change the settings on the stage unnecessarily.

Coincidentally or not, the Take Action Now Club was scheduled to perform last. In other words, they would rehearse first.

"Whoa! That's one hot chick." People said as Chako-sensei passed by.

"Those kids are adorable!" Others said, watching Sara and Elias.

The Take Action Now Club, having captured the sights of the people around them, headed for the stage.

"Wow... So this is where we're going to be playing, huh?" Kino thought out loud, looking out at the rather crowded stage. Of course, most of the crowd was the stage crew. There weren't any audience members here yet.



*'Three weeks ago, I never would have imagined that I'd end up singing and playing the guitar on a stage. That unagi-don special at Narita was really good.'*

"I remembered. We shouldn't be picky eaters."

Hermes whispered to Kino from her belt.

"But you eat anything that's in front of you, Kino."

"I haven't eaten *you*, Hermes."

"I don't taste that great, just to let you know."

"I'm not going to eat you. You're not even big enough for half a mouthful."

"That's good to hear."

Atop the stage was a real drum set and several very, very large amps.

On the audience-side of the stage were monitors through which the performers could hear their own playing. Because Kino didn't know anything about this aspect of performance, she left the stage setting to the experienced Shizu.

Inuyama took a seat at the drums and began to tap away, getting a feel for the sensation of a real set.

Chako-sensei was talking with the crew about pre-performance adjustments. And about the length of their performance.

"..."

"..."

And as for the two children—

Sara and Elias were just standing beside the darkened stage, not really doing anything.

Sara realized that Elias's hands were trembling ever-so-slightly.

"I-it's going to be all right!" She said, taking his hands in hers.

"Huh?"

But his trembling would not stop. Sara finally realized that she was also shaking.

"I'm sorry..." Elias said weakly.

"What for? Why are you apologizing, Elias?" Sara asked.

"I... I'm sorry I can't do anything to help..."

Elias looked to be about three seconds away from bursting into tears.

"...I-it's okay! It's going to be all right!" Sara said, mustering all her strength.

"I'm sorry..."

Elias, who ended up on the receiving end of comfort, bowed his head and looked at his feet.

The stage was lit.

"All right! Let's get started. We're the Take Action Now Club, and we'll be performing [My Gun is a Hotchkiss]!"

Kino's cheerful voice pierced them like bullets.

"My gun is a Hotchkiss~♪!" Kino finished. Inuyama and Shizu ended the song on an energetic note.

The rehearsal went off without a hitch.

"That was wonderful! Flawless work, everyone!" Chako-sensei said with a thumbs-up, stepping onto the stage from behind. Along the way, she stopped to speak to the sound crew, probably discussing the mix.

"Sweet! Now we just have to play once for the cameras!" Kino said with a satisfied laugh, "But before that, food!"

With the Stratocaster (the protective film had been peeled off) slung behind her back, Kino grinned at the two kids crouching beside the stage.

"Sara! Elias! Let's go eat!"

"O-okay..." "Okay..."

They both looked rather down, but Kino did not pay this any mind.

"I'm so hungry I could eat an elephant! I wonder what Chako-sensei packed for us today?"

The lunch menu was all she cared about at this point. The protagonist of Gakuen Kino always lives by the rule of self-centered thinking. And all she thinks about is food.

Taking along Sara and Elias, but not thinking to wait for Shizu and Inuyama, Kino headed for the waiting room.

Suddenly—

"Excuse us."

Two men wearing black suits appeared before them.

The men had been waiting at the end of the long hallway. They were both in their thirties or forties, and for some reason, they were wearing sunglasses even though they were indoors.

Kino glared at the obviously suspicious men and made her discomfort clear in her tone.

"What is it?"

No one would get between Kino and her lunch.

"We have some business with Miss Sara."

Kino glanced over at Sara.

"..."

"..."

Both Sara and Elias were terrified. They looked very much like little animals cornered by predators.

"Who are you?" Kino asked the men, putting lunch out of her mind for the moment. The men answered her plainly without expression.

"We are Miss Sara's bodyguards. We've been instructed by her parents to bring the young lady back home." One of the men said.

It had not been very long since the incident with Inid. Kino was wary, having been left with no way to know if the men were telling the truth.

"Are these people telling the truth?" Kino asked, turning to Sara and Elias.

Sara said nothing. Why would she not answer? But either way, she was clearly scared. Noting this, Kino decided to act like a responsible upperclassman for once.

"We're in the middle of club activities right now, actually. For school."

The man in the suit responded.

"We understand. But we have been instructed to take the lady back home for personal reasons pertaining to her family. I'm sure you understand. This is very important business."

Although the man's tone was polite, he sounded as though he was looking down on Kino, Sara, and Elias. It was true that he was taller than them, but that was irrelevant.

Kino got even more angry, but she couldn't think of any way to respond to the man. She was probably too hungry to think. I understand that feeling.

"If you'll excuse us, then." The man said, bypassing Kino and reaching towards Sara's skinny arm. But at that very moment, Chako-sensei's voice interrupted them.

"Oh?"

The man froze. Though Chako-sensei had neither raised her voice nor gotten angry, she made clear her tone of authority.

Kino turned around. Before her eyes were the man and Sara, and a petrified Elias who was on the verge of bursting into tears.

She also saw Chako-sensei, smiling elegantly with her head tilted slightly to the side.

"This won't do. I'm sorry, but the waiting room is for authorized personnel only. This is very important business, you know? I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Or should I just call security or the police?" Chako-sensei said without missing a beat. The men in suits paled slightly, especially at the mention of the police.

Chako-sensei went on to land the killing blow.

"Ah, let me introduce myself. My name is Kuroshima Chako, Sara's supervising teacher. And Sara is a key member of today's club activity. I'll explain the situation to her father, if you'll give me his contact information." She said, taking out her cell phone.

"We'll come back later." The men declined, turning away and disappearing down the hall.

Once the men were out of sight, Kino snorted. She then turned to Chako-sensei, perhaps motivated by the love of justice that was buried somewhere in her heart.

"Sensei?"

"What is it, Kino?"

"What's for lunch?"

Lunch was *onigiri* and assorted side dishes.

Multicolored *onigiri* filled with everything from salmon, pollack roe, salmon roe, and pickled plum, to bonito flakes and kelp. Each large handmade piece was wrapped in crunchy seaweed.

On the side they had salad, egg rolls, and fried chicken.

The burdock root salad was drenched in expensive mayonnaise that beautifully complemented its crunchy texture. A generous sprinkling of sesame seeds decorated the surface, highlighting the taste of the mayonnaise with its aroma.

The sweet golden egg rolls were firm on the outside and moist on the inside, like the consistency of an expertly baked cake.

The fried chicken, a mainstay of lunch boxes everywhere, was still steaming hot. Perhaps it had been made with delivery time taken into account.

Inside a separate container was finely diced radish and bitter orange dressing. Add these to your meal for a fresh and crispy experience!

Oh, don't forget to try the vinegar and the tartar sauce. Put vinegar on your fried chicken, followed by the tartar sauce, and you too can enjoy western-style fried chicken. The perfect balance of sour and sweet creates paradise on the tip of any taster's tongue.

"This is great!"

The writer has just made a typo, but seeing as whatever Kino is saying with her mouth full is going to be incomprehensible anyway, he decided to leave it as is.

Kino ate. She ate some more.

*Onigiri* and side dishes flew into her mouth at the speed of machine gun rounds, but there was so much food to begin with that it did not cause anyone else any problems. The Take Action Now Club shone brightly above everyone else in their corner of the room.

Shizu, Inuyama, Chako-sensei, and even the downcast Sara and Elias ate alongside her. Although the latter two only ate about as much as normal people.

"This is delicious."

"This food is excellent."

"It's really good!"

Shizu, Inuyama, and Chako-sensei ate almost as much as Kino. Ten *onigiri* each as though it were nothing, and loads of fried chicken.

Sara and Elias sometimes looked at them like they were aliens. When Kino noticed their gaze—

"Don't worry! If those creepy suits come again, I'll chase them out properly!"

The hungry Kino and the fully-fed and energized Kino were two completely different people.

Having taken in an uncountable number of calories, Kino was now without weakness.

"Th-thank you..." Sara said.

"..."

Elias, surrounded by the dependable Kino, Shizu, Inuyama, and Chako-sensei, hung his head silently.

<=>

"The weak are meek. Or should I say 'meak'? Heh."<sup>4</sup>

One of the men that had been driven away by Chako-sensei mumbled to himself, looking up at the sky beyond the window.

This has nothing to do with the story, but I wonder how foreign versions of Gakuen Kino will render this line? I apologize to all you translators.

There was a single minibus in the rather packed parking lot. Because it was surrounded by other trucks and buses, it did not stand out very much.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a pun in the original Japanese, where the words 'weak' and 'meek' are pronounced in the same way.

The car's windows were tinted, and inside—invisible to the world—were ten men in similar outfits, all wearing sunglasses. Their faces were frozen stiff.

A man beside the driver's seat was talking on a cell phone. He soon finished his call.

"We have word from the superiors." He said loudly to his fellow suits. All eyes were on him.

"It's impossible to force the internet's hand after all. The plan to cancel the live broadcast has failed."

The men groaned in defeat and sighed.

"Damn those internet providers... They're going to learn sooner or later that ignorance really is bliss." One of the men said, clearly very tired.

"Listen up, men." Said a solemn man who looked to be the leader. He was a man in his forties who had been listening silently with his arms crossed over his chest the whole time. He was also wearing sunglasses.

"We've done what we can to try and put a stop to this without a fuss. But we've reached the end of our rope. From now on, you have permission to use reasonable amounts of force."

Nine men swallowed simultaneously. *Gulp.*

"When the moment comes, do not hesitate. If only for the purposes of this plan, we must temporarily abandon our humanity."

In other words, the ends justified the means.

The bus was silent once more, save for a single voice.

"Um, I have a suggestion." One man in sunglasses spoke up, raising his hand. The leader gave him permission to speak.

"What if we all became demons? I bet turning into demons will make our work easier."

The men, thinking that this was a very sudden joke, burst into laughter.

"Poetic of you. Then sure, let's all become demons." The leader chuckled. The other men also voiced their agreement.

But no one was coming to the realization that there was currently one man among them whom they had never seen before. There were *eleven* people on this bus!

"Good luck." Said the man who made the suggestion, as he disappeared in a puff of smoke.

It was three minutes later that the bus was turned into a Tokyo subway train at rush hour by the ten demons.

It was thirty minutes later that they finally managed to pop themselves out of the bus.

Between those three and thirty minutes, the battle of bands began.

And between those three and thirty minutes, a UH-60J helicopter from the Japan Air Self-Defense Force's Chitose Base picked up a passenger at a certain private residence in Hokkaido and disappeared into the distance.

<=>

"Man, I'm getting nervous..."

The waiting room was filled with people waiting to perform on stage. Kino was one of them.

The members of the Take Action Now Club were in the furthest corner of the waiting room, at a table beside the back door, feasting on cake despite having eaten lunch very recently.

The other contestants watched them in disbelief, but that didn't really matter. Rest and relaxation is important, especially when you have a performance coming up. Besides, the Take Action Now Club was going to be playing at the very end.

There were a total of eight bands scheduled to play today. Each team was given a maximum of ten minutes to perform, but including the time it took to receive comments from the judges and the time it took to set up and take down equipment, each team would take up about double that amount.

It would take about three hours for all of the groups to finish playing. They began in the afternoon, so the performances would go into the evening.

From the waiting room, they could faintly hear the heavy metal band playing on the stage. They could hear it more loudly from the computer set up against one of the walls, where the internet broadcast was being shown.

"They really *are* showing this to the whole world. I wonder if Grandma's watching." Kino wondered, munching on a fruit tart.

"Ah, smells wonderful." Chako-sensei said, sitting comfortably and taking a sip of tea.

Shizu was just sitting with his eyes closed, breathing quietly. Was he taking a nap, or was he trying to meditate?

Inuyama sat opposite from Shizu, holding his drumsticks and thinking with his eyes wide open (in more of a Zen meditation-style than Shizu). How many more scenarios for defeating Shizu had he come up with? Unfortunately, even when asleep, Shizu left himself carefully guarded. Damn it.

What were the two brats doing now?

"..."

Sara was listening to something from a portable music player through a set of clearly expensive headphones, her eyes closed shut.

"..."

Elias was watching the only member of their group who was moving, Kino (who was busy eating cake). It wasn't that he particularly wanted to see Kino eat enough to send your jaw falling into the depths of the earth. He just had nowhere in particular he wanted to look at.

Proving this claim about Elias's mental state: His eyes met Kino's as she reached for another slice of cake.

"I'm just going to use the bathroom..." Elias mumbled, running out the back door as if in escape.

"Hah..."

Elias stepped out of the bathroom and sighed, on the verge of tears.

He did not feel up to returning to the waiting room. There was still some time left, anyway. He instead walked through the lobby and stepped outside for a breath of fresh air.

Unlike the stuffy community center, the world outside was deserted. There was a large park and a parking lot in front of him. It looked as though the world was frozen in time, probably because nothing was moving.

Elias walked through that sight, with no clear destination in mind.

Even when he stepped into the sun, under the clear blue sky, his mood did not improve. He looked around to make sure that no one was around.

"Why am I so weak? Sara has a teacher and three strong senpai helping her. All I do is get in her way..." Elias said, finally putting words to his feelings.

But letting it all out didn't help his mental state very much.

"I'm worthless..." He concluded, falling deeper into depression. So deep that he was digging into the ground. We understand, Elias.

But standing around here was not going to change anything. Standing in the sun did nothing to bring light into his heart.

Elias returned to the community center building and opened the door. The halls were very dark compared to the sunny world outside.

The boy disappeared into the darkness.

And at that very moment—

*BOOM!*

The minibus exploded from the inside out.

Ten demons, each about three meters high and bearing the forms of lions, began to roam through the parking lot.

You're finally out, guys.



<=>

"!"

Kino was digging into her Sachertorte when it struck.

A vein on her forehead suddenly grew visible.

"Hah!"

Inuyama, in the midst of working on his 249th scenario.

*Crack.*

His grip on his drumsticks tightened.

"Hm."

Shizu opened his eyes.

"Oh? What's wrong, everyone? We're almost up." Chako-sensei said as the three members suddenly got to their feet.

"I'm going to get some air." "I'm going to get some air." The men said at once.

"I'm... uh, I'm going to go pick some flowers." Kino said.

They were both euphemistic phrases for "I'm going to the bathroom".

"Oh. All right. But you know that we have to be on stage soon, right? Could you make it back in time?" Chako-sensei asked with a grin, even though there was still more than an hour left until their performance.

"Yes." "Yes." "Yes."

With that, the three members each left the waiting room through different doors.

The strangeness of the scene prompted Sara to take off her headphones and nervously turn to Chako-sensei.

"All three of them have diarrhea." Chako-sensei said with a smile. She's a real master at this 'excuses' business.

<=>

Meanwhile, our protagonist:

"What? What? What? What? Why?"

She rattled off one Wh-question after another as she ran down the thankfully-deserted community center halls. Don't try this at home, kids.

You see, there's a good reason they tell you to never run in the halls. The author thinks this because in junior high school, he personally watched a classmate get tripped by another straight into a concrete pillar. Although he thankfully wasn't bleeding, he was taken to hospital with a huge bump on his head. Just to let you know, this student was not the author. Even he isn't that clumsy.

"I sense a demon. But why here, of all places?" Hermes wondered casually, hanging from Kino's belt.

"No way! This isn't even the school! All right, who was it?! Who's the idiot that fell for temptation *this time*?! And why *now*?!" Kino spat, running to the back of the community center. The glass panes in the doors shone like gates to another dimension.

Sensing the demon's presence beyond it, Kino shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Hermes! I'm going for it!"

"Okay."

In 0.02 seconds, Kino drew the model gun from her right side and raised it high into the air.

She raised the hammer with her thumb and pulled it back with her index finger.

"From my cold! Dead! Hands!"

*Pop. Pop. Sparkle sparkle.*

Okay. Transformation complete.

It was over in the span of time it took Kino's left foot to overtake her right.

Her legs, until now bare save for a pair of socks, were now covered in a pair of sweatpants—the school gym uniform. Otherwise, Kino did not look very different from before.

She had transformed from Kino the ordinary high school student to Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino! It was a spectacular change to behold. How? Ask the author.

Kino holstered Big Cannon ~ Shining Iron Demon Destroyer, reached into one of the small pouches on her belt with her right hand, and reached for the back door with her left hand.

"It's a little ways away!"

Trusting in her warrior-of-justice-senses, Kino rushed outside.

*TTTTIIING!*

With the ringing of the guitar, the heavy metal band began its second song. At the same time, Kino found herself standing under the beautiful autumn sky.

As soon as she stepped outside, she took out an AR-57 from her pouch.

The AR-57 is an upper receiver for the AR-16 (or the M4) model. It is a relatively new firearm that can shoot high-speed P90 rounds.

Like the P90, it can hold up to fifty rounds at once. It's the perfect weapon for firing relentlessly at opponents. This particular model has a short barrel that just barely leaves room for a Rail Interface System to be equipped. It was equipped with a small laser sight for ease of aiming.

For your information, a Rail Interface System (RIS for short) is a method of attaching accessories to firearms. It refers to the rails covering the front of a gun. All kinds of accessories, from laser sights to flashlights (used to illuminate dark areas or momentarily blind the enemy with its powerful light) to fore-grips (a stabilization system for that makes it easier for the wielder to hold up the firearm for longer periods of time), can be attached to this part. Although I guess you don't really need this kind of knowledge to survive in the real world.

Anyway, Kino rushed outside.

"There!"

She found the demon quickly. (This is an example of grammatical inversion.)

A lone lion-shaped demon was sauntering on the grass about three meters away. On its hind legs. As soon as it spotted Kino—

*ROAAAAAR!*

It quickly lunged at her.

"Too slow!"

It was quickly taken down by a barrage of bullets from Kino's AR-57 (on automatic).

Kino approached the demon and pulled the trigger. With the crisp sound of gunshots, empty shell casings fell from the magazine slot like a torrent of water.

This gun was prone to some terrible recoil, but this was nothing for Kino in her transformed state. The bullets hit their mark, repeatedly hitting the demon's legs. It writhed in agony as it crumpled on the grass.

"Prepare yourself!"

Kino tossed the AR-57 into the air and drew Big Cannon from its holster.

*BANG!*

The bullet hit the demon just as it was attempting to get back up. Did you really think that Kino would miss? If she did, then you are looking at an impostor.

The demon trembled and began to shrink. Demon Sealed! Mission Accomplished.

"Heh."

Kino slowly holstered Big Cannon.

"..."

She spent the next nine seconds waiting in silence, then reached into the air to take hold of the AR-57.

She had tossed it so high that she missed her chance to look cool while catching it.

"And I'm done! Let's go back and eat something." Kino said to the dismay of the readers, putting her AR-57 back into her pouch.

"Mysterious Kino! Duck!"

A familiar voice. A voice that she never wanted to hear again.

But—

"Hah!"

Kino did as she was told and ducked on the spot.

*Whoosh.*

She could hear something slashing through the air overhead.

Kino shifted her center of balance and rolled backwards, putting distance between herself and her attacker.

Once she came to a stop, she looked up. She saw a demon swinging its thick arms towards her.

"What?"

For a moment, Kino was utterly lost.

She glanced over at the demon she had shot earlier. Lying in its place was a man in sunglasses.

"What's going on?"

She looked ahead. There was indeed another demon standing before her.

"What's going on?!"

"Let me explain, Mysterious Kino!"

This voice had come from someplace quite high up. Kino looked towards its source.

"It's you..."

To be very frank, she wanted to burst into tears there and then.

It was him. A mysterious man in a white mask.

A breeze. The autumn wind gently enveloped the man in its arms.

He wore a pristine school uniform and a fluttering silken cape of white. At his side was a katana. His teeth were pearly white, and over his eyes was a white mask that covered his eyes. Atop his head were a pair of white doggy ears, between which was a single red apple. Look! A dove (rest omitted).

Yes. At this point, no one really needs explanation. It was Samoyed Mask.

"Yes. It is I! Samoyed Mask V(ictory), the Composer of Love and Soul!"

During the time it took for Samoyed Mask V to recite his name, Kino drew an RPG-7 portable anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launcher and mounted it on one shoulder.

The RPG-7 is a bestseller weapon from the Old Soviet Union, and a mainstay of action movies. It is shaped like a very long cylinder, equipped with a cone-shaped warhead on one end.

The warhead is fired by the force of a detonation that takes place inside the cylinder. It then ignites the rocket motor, which flies towards the target. The cylinder, of course, can be used multiple times as long as you replace the warhead each time. So technically, it's not a rocket launcher, but a recoilless firearm. But this is, again, the kind of stuff you don't really need to know to survive in life.

Anyway, Kino took aim at Samoyed Mask V. But she hadn't yet shot at him.

"What's happening here?!" She demanded of him, taking a second to glance at the demon that was glaring straight at her.

"What do you mean by that?"

"That demon over there! I just sealed one away two seconds ago!"

"But it's right there, is it not?"

"I get it... This is *your* doing, isn't it?!"

"Hearing that pains my soul, Mysterious Kino."

It certainly was a terrible accusation. I bet she didn't even think before she named him a suspect. People like Kino are the reason libel will never disappear from this world.

In fact, at this moment, the one who was most composed was not Kino, but Samoyed Mask V.

"And who said that demons could only materialize one at a time?"

"Tch."

Kino pouted.

So far, we've only had one demon attacking at a time. But it's not like there's a rule book or anything to this whole business. And the government hasn't passed any laws decreeing one way or another, either.

"Have you ever heard this story, Mysterious Kino?" Samoyed Mask V said, surprisingly solemn today.

"Stop calling me that. And what story?"

Samoyed Mask V softly began to recite his tale.

"Somewhere in Japan, once, was a childless couple. They decided, in their sadness, to set aside a portion of their rather small income, in order to support needy children around the world. Five thousand yen per child, once a month. Eventually, many children came forward and asked this egoistic couple to formally adopt them. And one by one, husband and wife took these children—whom they had not once laid eyes on—as their own, providing financial assistance to these youngsters around the world."

"That's cute. So what?"

"The Japanese government gives grants to couples with children. 25000 yen per month, per child. The couple received this money every month and became very rich. And so, they lived happily ever after. The end."

"What the hell was that?!"

Kino was getting angry. But she suddenly remembered something and asked:

"So what does that story have to do with all the demons appearing today?"

"Absolutely nothing." Samoyed Mask V answered without missing a beat. Kino sighed at the thought of having wasted her time.

And.

"Hermes." She said to the cell phone strap hanging from her belt.

"What is it?"

"What's going on here?"

"See for yourself. We have multiple demons today."

"Now what am I supposed to do? I only get one shot of Big Cannon every time I transform. Are you going to give me special powers so I can shoot more than once this time?"

"That's no fun, is it?"

"So is this supposed to be about *fun*?"

"Just turn back and transform again. It's not like you have a limit to the number of transformations per day."

"Yeah, but... what if something happens between transformations?"

"Ha-hah! You're a warrior of justice, not an idiot! Scaredy-cat! Ironing board!" Samoyed Mask V teased. Kino mercilessly fired her RPG-7, but Samoyed Mask V leaned back where he stood and evaded the attack. The rocket flew into the woods and exploded alone.

There was a very loud explosion, loud enough to send all the crows in the forest flying. But no one the community center heard it. Probably because of the heavy metal band rocking out inside. This is how the world works.

*GROAAAAAR!*

The demon, sick of being ignored, roared at the top of its lungs and leapt off the ground, charging towards Kino.

It was moving like a bullet. Quicker than you could blink. Its gait rapid. Very fast.

*RRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!*

"Be quiet."

Kino used the RPG-7's cylinder to bat the demon away like a fly.

The demon yelped pitifully and flew at a spin for about two meters, finally landing on a parking sign. It finally came to a stop, crumpling the sign made of metal piping like paper.

It was the perfect moment to turn it back into a human, but unfortunately, Kino could not use the Big Cannon at the moment.

"Damn it. Looks like it's time to fall back." Kino grumbled. She placed the RPG-7 back into her pouch and pointed a finger at Samoyed Mask V, who was still standing on the rooftop.

"I'm letting you off easy this time! You'd better watch your back!"

A line straight out of the how-to-guide for villains. Anyway, Kino looked around for a hidden area where she could transform, and began to head for the woods in the park.

But—

"Huh?"

It was at the same time as Hermes's question that Kino noticed:

The grass before them was teeming with demons.

*"WHAAAAAAT?!"*

One, two, three, four, five, six.

Within her line of sight alone were six identical demons. Counting the one squirming on the sign, seven. Counting the one she had already turned back, eight.

"I'm... dreaming, right?" Kino said blankly.

Nope.

"That's right. I must be dreaming."

I just said that you weren't.

"If this is a dream, I wish I could get some *gyūdon* specials instead of all these demons."

How many times do I have to-

*GROAAAAAAR!*

Looks like the demons have identified Kino as their enemy. They began to gather towards her.

"This isn't good."

Kino was actually intimidated now.

Normal guns did nothing but inflict pain upon the demons. Even with a machine gun, she could not face down so many demons alone. And each time she sealed one away, she would have to buy time to return to the woods and transform back again.

Kino was in danger.

And when the maiden of justice finds herself in danger...

Kino banked on the one-in-a-million—one-in-a-billion—or actually, the probably unlikely, definitely nonexistent chance and looked over at the katana-wielding man standing on the roof of the community center.

"...With numbers like this, even I'm a bit... cowed." Samoyed Mask V mumbled, kneeling on the spot and taking a sip of Japanese tea. Kino prayed with all her heart for a meteor to hit him on the head.

Even at this moment, the demons were closing in on her.

"Ugh!"

Kino drew an MG-3 machine gun from a previous battle, and its magazine belt. She loaded it in one motion and held it at waist-level.

Looks like she was planning to provide herself cover fire while penetrating the wall of demons. There's a saying about 'snatching victory from the jaws of defeat'. But please don't get the two words switched around.

"HAAAAAAH!"

Kino bravely charged forward.

*GUUUUUUOOOOOOHHH!*

The demons leapt forward at once, heading straight into Kino's path.

*Ratatatatatatatatatatatatatat!*



The MG-3 sang. Kino focused her attack on the demon directly in front of her. And after taking about thirty rounds to the chest, it fell backwards.

Kino ran for it. She had to escape before the demon could get back on its feet. But being outnumbered is never an enviable situation.

“Urgh!”

The five remaining demons charged into her path, blocking off her escape. Things were not looking good.

*Ratatatatatatatatat!* With another burst of fire from the MG-3, two more demons fell. But by then, the first demon had gotten back on its feet.

“Shit!”

This is bad. This series is in trouble. Is this going to be the final episode, Hermes wondered.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Four heavy gunshots rang out through the air as the four demons surrounding Kino were thrown backwards as though they had been hit with wrecking balls. It looked like they had been shot with extremely powerful rounds.

“Oh!”

Kino turned her gaze to the origin of the four bullets.

“Now, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino! Into the woods!”

“Detective Wanwan!”

He’s finally here, folks! The suspicious white-haired fighter clad in black and wearing a pair of sunglasses, Detective Wanwan.

He was standing atop the bed of a truck parked in the parking lot, holding a gun in each hand. A pair of Lahti anti-tank rifles, to be precise.

The Lahti L-39 is a Finnish 20mm anti-tank rifle, a monster of a gun that can fire the kind of rounds normally used with machine guns that are equipped on fighter planes. This weapon was responsible for destroying countless Soviet vehicles and tanks in World War Two.

Each Lahti is a full two meters long, and weighs nearly fifty kilograms. But Detective Wanwan was wielding one in each hand, his arms held straight up as he fired. Don’t try this at home, kids.

“Go!”

*Bang! Bang!*

Two more shots. Two gigantic shell casings fell to the ground. As Kino broke into a run, two of the demons before her bolted to the side.

Kino took this chance to break through the gap and made for the forest.

"Yeah! I knew I could count on you!" She cried cheerfully, and dove into the trees on the slope.

<=>

"All right!"

Once Kino had disappeared into the woods, Detective Wanwan abandoned the demons completely and aimed his two Lahtis at the roof of the community center.

Sitting there was a man with a katana.

"Ah. Delicious."

He was still drinking his tea. His back was turned.

"Hah!"

Detective Wanwan broke his usually-composed character and cried out as he fired. And as though acting in stead of his emotions, two 20mm rounds cut through the air, straight towards Samoyed Mask V.

The moment Detective Wanwan was convinced of victory, two tomatoes exploded and turned into a fine pink mist.

"Grown in Shizuoka Prefecture." Samoyed Mask simply said, disappearing from the rooftop without leaving behind so much as a drop of tea.

"Damn you!"

Detective Wanwan's curse was the only sound left in the parking lot.

<=>

"From my cold! Dead! Hands!"

Kino recited her catchphrase for the second time today.

She had turned back within a second of diving into the woods, and had called out by the second second. Busy, busy. She's going to have a sore throat by the end of all this.

The light faded, and Kino was back to her transformed state. Two heavy gunshots rang out in the distance.

*'Detective Wanwan must be doing his best to hold them off!'* Kino thought under a terribly mistaken impression, holstering Big Cannon.

"All right! I'm gonna keep rolling. I'll seal them all before the performance starts!" She cried at the top of her lungs, sprinting out of the woods.

<=>

"Um..." Elias mumbled, looking up at Chako-sensei.

The heavy metal band finally finished their passionate display of music. They returned to the waiting room, covered in sweat and their makeup running, but full of satisfaction at having played to their heart's content. The waiting room was temporarily filled with silence.

The community center's soundproofing was perfect. They couldn't hear anything that was going on outside, so nobody knew about the commotion taking place with the demons.

"They're really late, aren't they?"

By the time Elias had returned, Kino, Shizu, and Inuyama were already gone. He thought he felt a very strong breeze in the halls, but he saw nothing, and he couldn't see anything that might have caused the gust.

"..."

Elias's question prompted Sara to also look up at Chako-sensei, who was still the picture of calm composure.

"Yes they are. They must have eaten too much after all." Chako-sensei responded casually, but this did not ease Elias's worries one bit.

"I-if they don't make it back on time..."

What a worrywart, being concerned when there was still an entire hour left. He just might end up with a stomach ulcer in the future.

Chako-sensei, for whom stomach ulcers were a thing of fantasy, smiled.

"Have some tea and relax, Elias."

"B-but..."

"S-sensei is right, Elias. We're going to be okay. I have faith in them." Sara said, interrupting Elias.

"Hm? Oh. Right..."

Elias realized that he was being consoled by the person he was trying to protect, not the other way around.

"Right..."

Once more, he felt profound sadness and found himself wanting to run away.

Elias trembled.

"Then I'll brew us some very sweet tea! Let's all drink together."

If Chako-sensei hadn't spoken up in time, he really might have ended up running away.

<=>

A band composed of fat middle-aged men began a wonderful performance that might have been quite popular in its heyday.

*GUOOOOOOOOOOH!*

At that moment, Kino was fighting.

She had turned three demons back into human form. And each time, she dove back into the forest to undo her transformation and transform back, before fighting some more. It was a very difficult battle.

"I'm hungry!"

Didn't you just eat enough to stuff ten elephants full?

"There!"

A demon poked its head out from behind one of the cars in the jam-packed parking lot. Kino aimed the Mossberg Model 590 shotgun in her left hand at it and pulled the trigger.

For your information, the Mossberg Model 590 is a long, thin, military-use shotgun with bayonet capabilities.

The demon, hit square in the back of the head with a slug from this baby, swayed with a terrible concussion before finally crashing to the ground.

Kino clambered onto the demon's back, and still holding the Mossberg Model 590 in her left hand, drew Big Cannon with her right.

*Bang!*

She took aim at the demon's back and pulled the trigger.

The demon slowly began to return to human form, but she left him there and then.

"That's four down! Three more to go!"

Kino continued to fight. In the distance, she could hear Detective Wanwan firing away on his two Masada ACRs. He must have been analyzing their movements and hindering them as best he could.

"Thanks, Detective Wanwan! Hold on, I'll be right back!"

Kino zigzagged through the parking lot and disappeared into the forest.

Meanwhile, Samoyed Mask V:

"The sky is beautiful today."

He was lying on the roof of the community center, looking up at the autumn sun.

"Come on, melanin!" He cried, "turn my white cape a crisp tan brown!"

That doesn't sound too likely.

As Kino took care of the demons one after another, time passed.

"Just one left!"

There was, as she said, just one demon left. But this particular ball of trouble refused to be caught.

Perhaps it had seen Kino picking off its friends one by one. It began to flee from the community center. 'Flee' in this case having the meaning of 'escape'.

"Hold it right there!"

Driven by anger and hunger, Kino sprinted across the park and chased the demon down like a ghost straight out of an urban legend.

In her right hand was Big Cannon. In her left, a Colt Government M1911A1 .45 caliber automatic pistol.

"I have to hurry! There's not much time left until the performance!"

Kino's 100% accurate hunger clock warned her that she only had a few minutes until she was due to go on stage. And considering the amount of time she needed to recharge (see: eat), she only really had a minute to chase down this demon.

"You're not getting away!" Kino cried. But if this demon would bow to threats like this, it never would have tried to run in the first place. And this demon in particular was quite fast.

Did it have eyes on the back of its head? It avoided all of Kino's attacks from the Colt Government, zigzagging across the grass.

It was at that very moment.

"I see you may need my help! Rest omitted!"

Samoyed Mask V, who had transformed himself into a blade of grass in the park, turned back to human form as he popped up in the demon's path.

"Hah!"

And in one smooth motion, he drew his sword and landed a powerful strike on the demon's body.

The demon was too sturdy to be cut, but it was momentarily stunned by the blow to the gut.

This single moment was enough for Kino.

A round from Big Cannon flew towards the demon, covering a distance that normal pistols could never reach, before hitting the demon. At the same time, a round from the Colt Government—

—bounced off of Samoyed Mask V's mask.

A round of applause for our brave warriors!

The commotion was over. But—

"What? What are you going to be late for?" Samoyed Mask V asked, perfectly keeping pace with Kino despite the fact that he was hopping. How? Because he's Samoyed Mask V, that's how.

Kino used all of her strength to ignore Samoyed Mask V.

No you won't.

That's more than enough.

## **Chapter 7 - Part 4: Elias's Battle**

### **~Fight for You~**

"We're done for..."

Elias was nearly sobbing.

"..."

Sara remained silent, sitting as though in prayer.

"Don't worry. It's going to be all right."

Chako-sensei said, casually dropping a macaroon into her mouth. At that moment—

"Sorry I'm late!" Kino cried, bursting in through the door.

The waiting room was already empty. Everyone else had already performed (or were still performing), and those who had finished cleaning up after themselves were sitting with the audience to watch the last of the performances.

"I'll get ready right away!"

Wait a second. This isn't Kino. This is Mysterious Kino. How can you tell? By her school-issue sweatpants.

"Where were you... huh?" Elias said, interrupting himself partway through, "You're Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino! What are you doing here?" He asked.

"Oh my gosh! You're Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino! I've heard rumors about you at school..." Sara said, eyes wide.

"Uh... well... some things came up, and..."

Kino could not tell them the truth. This was because...

"Greetings, everyone!"

This guy ↑ followed her all the way here, making it impossible for Kino to undo her transformation.

"Samoyed Mask!" Elias exclaimed, reeling in shock for the second time. What a well-informed boy.

"What... what are the heroes of the school doing here at the concert?! What's going on here?"

Elias must have been *very* surprised. It seemed like all kinds of emotions were getting the better of him at once.

"May I come in?"

Asking for permission to enter (but not really because he was already inside) was Detective Wanwan, clad in a black coat.

"Whoa!"

Elias leapt up as though a dog had bitten his ankle and fell on his rear. He looked up at the young man in black clothes and sunglasses.

"D-Detective Wanwan..."

There's nothing you *don't* know, is there, Elias? Who shot J. F. Kennedy?

"It was \_\_\_\_\_..."

You're one bright kid. (Name censored for obvious reasons)

Then let's try another question. What are the true identities of these three heroes?

"I don't know. I just can't tell... Their transformations are too perfect..."

Thank goodness for that.

Sara was frozen in shock. Chako-sensei sipped tea beside her and turned to our heroes.

"Oh? And what brings all three warriors of justice here?"

[I'm been asked to fill come in take Kino's Shizu's Inuyama place busy on today performance stage!]

Hey, hey! Not all at once! Your lines are getting mixed up together!

Now, one at a time!

"I was asked to take Kino's place on stage because she collapsed of hunger!" Said Mysterious Kino.

"I've been asked to take the stage in Shizu's stead because he has been taken to the hospital for acute appendicitis!" Said Samoyed Mask V.

"I was told that Inuyama is too busy brushing his teeth today to join the performance." Said Detective Wanwan.

Kino made clearly visible her outrage at Samoyed Mask V taking Shizu's place, but she said nothing because she did not want to end up jeopardizing the performance because of a few complaints. And as for Detective Wanwan, she preferred him to Inuyama anyway.

"So all three of them had to cancel last minute? That's horrible. They should be ashamed of themselves." Chako-sensei said, looking as relaxed as can be. "Then I'm counting on you to play in their stead!"

"Yes ma'am!" "Of course!" "Yes!"

"Excellent!"



Chako-sensei got off her seat and picked up a small, 20-centimeter basket that had been lying face-down by the table.

"All of this is yours."

The objects hiding under the basket shone like the lights of paradise.

"Wow!"

At least, that's what it looked like to Kino, from whose eyes sparkles were falling.

There, underneath the basket, was a gigantic circular platter about a meter in diameter, laden with over a hundred colorful cakes!

Hm? Is there something wrong with the scale? Please don't demand exact science from a professional writer.

"Help yourself, everyone. Recharge yourselves before the performance. I was saving these for the Take Action Now Club, but I can't just give away these lovely things to such irresponsible students. Now, there's only three minutes left before we have to take our instruments and go up on stage..."

The warriors of justice dug into the cakes.

The warriors of justice finished the cakes.

"...So please be quick."

They were done before Chako-sensei had time to finish her sentence. This kind of superhuman speed is a basic requirement for warriors of justice these days. Colossal power needs colossal amounts of calories.

Because Kino was faster than the others, she managed to finish off about forty cakes on her own. She wiped whipped cream off her lips with her fingers and licked them.

"I could still have some more, but they say it's better not to stuff yourself too full. Eighty percent!"

Huh.

At that point, a crew member poked his head into the waiting room.

"The... 'Take Action Now Club'? It's almost time for you to come up on stage!"

"All right! Let's get going!" Kino cried, energetically taking to her feet.

"The bass calls to me." Samoyed Mask V said, getting up with his hand on his katana.

"It's time to rock..." Detective Wanwan muttered as he stood up.

They took hold of the guitar, bass, and drumsticks respectively.

"We'll do our best!" They said, following the crew member out of the waiting room.

"..."

"..."

Sara and Elias watched them depart with mouths agape.

"It's not going precisely as planned, but it'll be all right." Chako-sensei assured them.

But Elias the Chickenhearted did not seem to be convinced.

"B-but..."

"It's going to be okay!" Sara interrupted him, in a clear and confident voice that was a total 180 from her earlier tone. "If Chako-sensei says it'll be all right, then it *will* be. I believe in sensei!"

Chako-sensei grinned. But Elias looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"I... I..."

*'I'm so useless...'* He thought, but he could not bring himself to say it out loud. He got to his feet.

"Elias?"

Ignoring Sara's voice calling after him, Elias ran out of the waiting room.

He was not running towards the stage, where the others had gone.

Instead, Elias took the door that Kino had used to leave earlier.

"I'm... I'm completely useless..." He said weakly, running through the hall with tears scattering in his wake.

He ran and ran. Through the door to the outside.

His breathing was ragged now, but he took a very deep breath.

"I'M COMPLETELY USELESS!" He cried to the empty parking lot.

"There's nothing I can do for her! She doesn't even need me! Because... because I'm weak. Because I'm always so scared..."

Elias continued to cry, tears dribbling down his cheeks and his voice becoming nasal.

There were no people around to hear his voice.

But there *were* some demons there.

*GUOOOOOHHHH! GROAAAAR!*

Two demons howled from either side of Elias.

"I'm just- huh?"

And just as Elias noticed them in the midst of his self-deprecating screams, they easily knocked him away with their large arms.

Elias's tiny body flew through the air.

"Ugh!"

He fell onto the flower bed on his back.

Not knowing what was going on, Elias fought the aching of his body and the dizziness of his vision as he saw what was going on.

The two demons were heading for the doors—the doors that Elias had left wide open.

*GUOOOOH! GRAAAHHH!*

The demons were howling as though they were happy to have finally found the entrance.

Wait, so is that why they couldn't get inside all this time? Because they couldn't find the doors?! It looks like the more demons there are at once, the more stupid they get. Yes, I made this up just now. Yes, it is canon.

"Demons..."

Elias, also being a student at Kino's school, could tell what was going on even in his weakened state. Several people must have been tempted into becoming demons.

"...Are they after Sara?!"

Although Elias has no concrete proof backing his assumption, he had good reason to believe that this was the case.

He also realized one unfortunate fact.

"No! Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino is... she's..."

That's right.

All three warriors of justice had taken the stage.

At this very moment, Kino and the others were indeed standing on the stage.

[Finally, our last performance! This is the Take Action Now Club, from the local \_\_\_\_\_ Academy! All of the members are high school students. And by the way, those are some very interesting costumes you're all wearing today. What was your inspiration?] The emcee asked.

"Uh... Halloween." Kino said. Well, Halloween was just a few days ago.

"..."

Elias stood blankly, a thin stream of blood trailing down his face and the bridge of his nose. It looked like he had a small cut on his forehead.

The demons happily stepped towards the door together, and crashed into each other as they attempted to squeeze in at the same time. Is this supposed to be a slapstick comedy?

Elias watched them struggle again and again. As his vision grew red, he began to think:

*'If only I had power... Then I could defeat those demons.'*

*'No... Even if I couldn't...'*

*'If nothing else... I... I could hold them off...'*

*'I could keep them away from Sara until Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino finishes performing...'*

*'Even if it means I have to give up my life...'*

*'I...'*

[Is that what you truly desire?]

There was a voice.

Elias was no longer able to even wonder where that voice had come from.

"Yes."

[How far are you willing to go to fulfill your wish?]

"As far as it takes."

[Do you wish for power?]

"Yes."

[How will you use your newfound strength?]

"I'm going to use it to protect Sara."

[Once you have taken hold of this power, there will be no turning back.]

"That's fine with me."

[Hoh. So do you not care what happens to you?]

"As long as I can save Sara... I don't care what happens."

[Your courage is admirable. Then I shall grant you the power you desire. Use it as you will.]

"Thank you..."

The moment Elias's consciousness faded, his body began to change.

He trembled for a moment, before his arms and legs began to grow.

His entire body became larger.

His uniform tore like scraps of paper and scattered across the flower bed.

His messy blond hair began to grow.

*GUOOOOOOH! GROAAAAAAR!*

The two demons had finally figured out that they could pass through the doors if they went in one at a time. They were now glaring at each other to determine who would be the first to enter.

At that very moment, yet another demon loomed behind them.

<=>

[Now, for the moment we've all been waiting for! Here is the Take Action Now Club with their song, 'My gun is a Hotchkiss!']

The emcee left the stage.

"A-one, a-two, a-one, two, three, four..."

Detective Wanwan started off the song from the drum set.

Samoyed Mask V's bass began to rumble.

Kino, who stood with her head bowed and her guitar before her,

"Start!"

Finally raised her head. She confidently played a powerful chord and took a deep breath.

She then began to sing.

[Step over the past and future and raise a battle cry~♪]

*GUOOOOOH!*

The two demons were thrown back all the way to the parking lot with a painful cry.

*GUOH? GRAH?!*

They got to their feet, and looked over at the door that they had been trying to enter until just moments ago.

*GRRRRRRRRRRR...*

A demon covered in golden fur snarled at them, carefully closing the community center doors.

[They call you a barbarian, and you're covered in blood~♪]

The golden demon leapt forward.

It charged straight ahead, towards the two black demons.

It then attacked them with both its arms. The demon on the right was knocked backwards by the blow, but the one on the left evaded the attack and landed a powerful kick on the golden demon.

The golden demon was sent flying into a truck in the parking lot. The truck's windshield cracked.

[But fight on with your comrades in arms~♪]

The black demons charged, standing shoulder-to-shoulder. But the golden demon did not show any sign of running.

*GUUUUUUOHH!*

It roared at its enemies, landing a jab on one of the demons' faces. The poor thing spun in midair like a top. The second demon, however, launched itself from the ground and landed a flying jump kick on the golden demon. The asphalt covering the parking lot shattered as the golden demon crashed onto it.

[You alone can enter battle, on behalf of those who can't~♪]

Though humans are tragic creatures destined to fight forever~♪]

The demon that had landed the kick quickly leapt at the fallen golden demon. It jammed its knee into the golden demon's stomach.

*GUOOOOOOOH!*

The golden demon cried out in pain, saliva bursting from its mouth.

As the first demon continued its relentless assault, the second demon that had been knocked away returned, mercilessly adding to the one-sided show of violence.

[Though this truth is played out for the ages~♪]

The beatings continued for several seconds. The golden demon desperately struggled to get back up, but soon even its moans of pain ended as it fell limply to the ground.

[We'd sooner mark ourselves for Hell than send our loved ones to Heaven today~♪]

The black demons left the golden demon where it lay, and turned back towards the community center—the doors through which they could now pass.

*Groar. Rrr...*

They exchanged glances and nodded happily, then set their right feet forward at the same time.

[We march into the battlefield to protect their futures~♪]

And as they prepared to follow up with their left—

*Guoh? Groar...?*

They realized that they could not move their left feet. They looked down.

The hands that were clutching their left feet were covered in golden fur.

[Now, soldiers, let us march~♪]

*Guooooooohhh...*

The golden demon slowly got to its feet. Its grip on the black demons' legs remained, as it hoisted them upside-down into the air.

[Hold your heads high and walk side-by-side~♪]

They were spinning. The demons were spinning.

As soon as it was fully on its feet, the golden demon began to spin where it stood.

The black demons, held in midair by their ankles, spun. Centrifugal forces forced blood into their heads. Everything was spinning.

[The gun you carry is the weight of all you must defend~♪  
Remember and remember~♪]

*GUOOOOOOH!*

The golden demon let go of its grip on the black demons. They flew through the air and hit the community center's concrete wall. Huge cracks were left in the wake of their landing.

*Guoh... Grr...*

The two demons lost consciousness, falling to the grass and lying still.

[My gun is a Hotchkiss~♪!]

Kino beautifully finished the song, playing her final chord.

Samoyed Mask V and Detective Wanwan, on the bass and drum set respectively, sounded out the finale. And at that very moment—

*Grrrr...*

The golden demon stumbled where it stood, falling to the ground beside a truck. It also lay completely still.

"It's over..."

A wave of applause swept over Kino as she stood on the stage, not even thinking to wipe the sweat on her brow.

The audience, which filled the hall almost to full capacity, showed the Take Action Club no shortage of praise.

Kino turned around. The masked man with the apple on his head was standing there with his teeth sparkling under the lights. The young man wearing sunglasses and sitting at the drums had a slightly disheartened, but proud expression on his face.

[Amazing!] Cried the emcee as he stepped onto the stage. [Excellent performance! And I really have to say, those lyrics were something else!]

He pushed his mic into Kino's face.



"Uh... um... Thank you, everyone!" Kino said, bowing deeply with the guitar still hanging from its straps. There was another round of applause.

[It looks like this group still has one more song to play. Since 'My Gun is a Hotchkiss' was a relatively short song, you still have plenty of time left for your next performance!]

Kino frowned. Her brow was so crinkled that even someone sitting in the back of the back would be able to count the creases.

This was the first she'd heard about a second song. She hadn't even practiced for it. What was going on?

"And this time, I'll also be joining them as their supervising teacher."

That voice belonged to Chako-sensei.

"What?"

Kino turned around towards her.

Standing there were two people.

One was Sara, who was still dressed in her school uniform. But Chako-sensei, who had been wearing a rather professional outfit until just minutes earlier—

"..."

Chako-sensei was dressed so loudly that Kino shut her mouth without even thinking.

Her white hair was standing on end in spikes, and there was face paint on her cheeks. The palette of her clothes consisted of bright primary colors, like the plumage of a tropical bird.

And slung around her shoulders was an electric guitar.

## **Gakuen Kino's Music and Instrument Corner - Part 5**

Although Kino had no way of knowing this, Chako-sensei's guitar was a Gibson Les Paul. This particular Cherry Sunburst model was made in 1995. The main body was deep red like American cherries, and a splash of sunscorched yellow graced the front of the guitar.

The Gibson Les Paul is one of the most famous electric guitars in the world, alongside the Fender Stratocaster. It was named after the great guitarist Les Paul.

End explanation.

As Kino looked on in confusion,

"Hello there, everyone! Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Chako-sensei took center stage, her every step oozing with high-artificial cuteness.

"..."

Sara followed behind her, bearing in her eyes all the determination of a warrior bound for the battlefield.

"Wh-what's going on? Kino told me when she collapsed of hunger that I only had to perform this one song." Kino whispered to Chako-sensei as the latter drew near.

"I'm sorry. We didn't tell Kino, but we decided to play a second song."

"What?"

Kino turned to the others. And to her great shock—

"Hm?"

Samoyed Mask V and Detective Wanwan were both preparing for the second performance as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

*'What, so you all left me out of this?'* Kino thought, slightly disappointed.

"..."

But she soon reminded herself that Chako-sensei wouldn't have done such a thing without good reason. Actually, she also considered the possibility that Chako-sensei didn't have any reason in particular for this bizarre choice.

Either way, standing around here was a waste of time. Kino bowed to the audience once more and began to walk off the stage.

"Make sure you keep an eye out." Chako-sensei said under her breath as Kino passed by, handing her something. It was a PDA of some sort, about the size of a small book.

Although Kino didn't know enough about technology to pinpoint the specifics about the model, she understood what was going on. Chako-sensei probably wanted her to keep an eye out on the internet broadcast.

*'But can't I watch it all on the computer in the waiting room?'* Kino wondered, taking the PDA with her as she left for the waiting room.

"This is so strange. What's she up to?" Kino wondered. She walked down the hall towards the waiting room, and confirming that there was no one in sight, she undid her transformation. Her sweatpants disappeared as she took another step forward.

She fiddled with the PDA for a while until the screen finally flickered to life. She saw Chako-sensei prepping her guitar on the stage. She could hear the murmuring of the audience.

"Chako-sensei is going to play the guitar while Sara sings." Hermes said from Kino's belt. "I wonder if she'll sing better than you, Kino."

"Who knows? Let's see what she's made of." Kino chuckled.

"You shouldn't be so haughty, you know."

"Ahahaha..."

Kino and Hermes cheerfully stepped into the waiting room.

"Huh. Where'd Elias go?"

Elias was nowhere to be found. The waiting room was empty.

Was he watching from the audience, Kino wondered. She assumed that he was, so she did not worry about him. And there was no need for him to have stuck around to watch their things anyway, as they did not have any valuables that needed guarding. Their cake was already in their stomachs, after all.

Kino decided to relax and watch the performance through the PDA. She sat in a chair and leaned back.

It was at that very moment.

"!"

A vein on her forehead suddenly grew visible. Again.

"Not again!"

Kino clambered out of her chair, knocking it to the floor in the process.

"A demon." Hermes confirmed.

"There's *more* of them?!"

Kino ground her teeth as she flew out of the room. She raised the PDA's volume to its maximum and hung it by its strap beside Hermes. Now she would at least be able to hear the performance.

And so,

"From my cold! Dead! Hands!"

Kino transformed for the ninth time today.

<=>

A little before Kino transformed into Mysterious Kino:

"I don't care *what* you have to do! Shut up and do as I say!!"

A middle-aged man was roaring into the receiver with a look of utter outrage in his eyes. He was wearing a very expensive suit, and was sitting in a luxurious office atop a very high skyscraper. He was probably the president of a large company.

All of Tokyo was visible from the windows. A helicopter was flying across the sky.

The middle-aged man was not alone in this large office. He was accompanied by a woman who looked to be his secretary and several men who seemed to be his subordinates. They looked nothing short of disheartened, and the air around them was as solemn as a funeral.

The company president raised his voice.

"That's it! The power! We can just cut the power to the community center! Then they won't be able to continue the broadcast! Just one hour—an hour-long blackout in this area, and everything will be all right!"

What an unbelievable idea.

The computer screen in the office was displaying the livestream of the performance. The Take Action Now Club was clearly visible. It was the very image that was being shown on Kino's PDA.

"WHAT?! Listen closely, now. Cut the power immediately, or I'll kill you *and* your family! Your wife, your children and their spouses, and even your newborn grandson!"

He was talking like this was nothing, but if you think about it, threats like this are basically a crime.

The man on the other end of the conversation:

[Y-yes, sir... But if I cut the power, I'll be fired for certain... If you could possibly prepare a place for me in your company...] He said feebly. This man was probably one of the officials at the power company.

"Is that all? That's fine by me. I'll have you join my company as an advisor. Now you'll be set for life! Go! Do it!"

The president grinned, sticking out his tongue at the subordinates standing beside him. The subordinates, looking a little more relaxed now, nodded ecstatically.

It looked like these people had no intention of following through with this promise. In fact, they were planning to push all of the blame onto this hapless power company official.

The evil president looked at Chako-sensei on the screen as she finished up her preparations.

"Yes. Perfect timing. I'll count down to zero, at which point you'll cut the power."

Some of you might be wondering if this guy's deluded himself into thinking this was some sort of a rocket launch, but a countdown is a technique you can use to prevent your target from bailing at the last second. People need to have a sense of urgency pushing them when they're about to do something big. Like bungee jumping.

"Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven."

*BANG!*

Just before the man could say 'six', the glass windows shattered. A powerful gust of wind blew through the office, creating a gale that sent papers flying everywhere.

"Gah!" "Eep!" "What the-" "Oh no!"

His employees were screaming.

"What in the world is going on here?!"

The president bellowed through the howling wind.

It was at that very moment.

They caught sight of a woman standing in the debris.

She was slender in build, and her eyes were covered in sunglasses. But the wrinkles on her face and her long silver hair gave away the fact that she was quite elderly.

She was wearing black, tight-fitting pants, and a white shirt topped off with a black jacket. Holstered at her waist was a single revolver.

The rope hanging in from the window disappeared along with the ferocious roar of the helicopter. It was the very chopper that had been flying across the sky a little earlier. Looks like it was a piece of foreshadowing after all.

"Wh-what do you want?" The president gaped, forgetting even the countdown. His shock wasn't surprising in the least, seeing as it wasn't very common for people to trespass into a room two hundred meters in the air and covered in bulletproof glass.

"I am the Beautiful Senior Gunman, Granny the Super." The woman said casually, even though no one had asked for her name. "I am here to put a stop to your evil deeds."

"Wh-what is this?! Who is this senile old woman?!"

Oh dear.

It looks like this poor company president had no idea.

The fact of the matter was that this woman he had just shouted at was the famous 'Beautiful Senior Gunman, Granny the Super'.

Militaries around the world trembled in fear of her, educating all recruits thus: There is no shame in fleeing from Granny the Super, and fleeing from her does not constitute an act of desertion. In other words, a flee-on-sight order.

Her legends had been immortalized in countless movies through the ages. More recently, Japan had joined the trend with films like [Granny on the Cliff by the Sea] and [Granny Cantabile]. The 3-D Hollywood film, [Granvatar], also went on to become a mega-hit.

For your reference, her rather modest entrance today is because she wanted to keep her activities a little more discreet this time.

The Blue Impulses from the Air Self-Defense Force's Acrobatics Team, which provided the air show for Granny the Super last time, were currently flying over the skies of the Iruma Base. The Iruma Base has a celebration featuring their performances every year on this day.

"Hey! Don't just stand around here!" The president said, turning to his subordinates. The men quickly drew something that resembled handguns from their pockets.

This weapon, which is an almost uncanny replica of a mid-sized automatic handgun, is actually something called a Taser. When you pull the trigger on one of these babies, it shoots out two small darts that plunge into the target and shoots tens of thousands of volts into the body. Normal humans would be rendered immobile very quickly.

This weapon is used in the States by the police to subdue fleeing criminals without killing them, but it cannot be purchased here in Japan.

To think that run-of-the-mill employees in this company could carry around weapons like this. This was no normal workplace, that much was certain.

"Tie up this crazy old loon and toss her out the window or something!" The president said, turning his back on the woman to resume his countdown.

"Excuse me."

At that instant, someone snatched the receiver from behind him.

"What the..."

The president turned around. Granny the Super's face was a mere half-meter from his. His own stupefied face was staring back through her sunglasses.

"Wha...?"

He turned his gaze slightly to the side. His subordinates had fallen to the floor in a heap, and the secretary was rooted to the spot, her cheeks pale.

"I... didn't even see her move..." She managed to gasp before her eyes rolled back into her head and she fainted on the spot.

"Eeeee..."

The president let out a decidedly un-dignified squeal as he stood frozen where he stood.

"Excuse me. Hello? Yes. The president has changed his mind, and would like to let you know that there will be no need to cut the power. We will take care of the rest, so please continue with your work. Thank you." Granny the Super said into the receiver, hanging up afterwards.

"Wh-what do you think you're-"

The president glanced over at the monitor. The performance had already started.

He faced forward again.

"Eeeeeee!"

There was no one there. The receiver had been placed back onto the phone.

"..."

The president gaped blankly for several seconds.

"...Is this... a dream...? Yes... it must be. It must be a nightmare. Ahaha! Yes! Just a silly nightmare!" He concluded. "This was all just an accident!"

Something must have crashed into the windows and knocked everyone to the floor, he convinced himself. He must have been having a bad dream, he thought.

The president again picked up the receiver and prepared to press the redial button.

"Hm?"

It was then that he noticed the silent change in his surroundings.

The wall, which had only moments ago been a pristine white, was covered in large letters of red.

[Turn yourself in. I will be watching everything. -Granny the Super]

It was said that his scream of terror could be heard from all the way in Ibaraki Prefecture.

**Chapter 7 - Part 5: Sara's Battle**  
**~Song for You~**

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here goes our second song!"

Chako-sensei and her Les Paul were ready.

"Heh. Time to show off my skills."

Detective Wanwan raised his drumsticks in preparation.

"O world, prepare to be floored."

Samoyed Mask V cracked up the volume on his bass to the max.

"..."

Sara, holding the mic over her chest, quietly closed her eyes.

<=>

All of this was being shown on a certain super-large television.

"Wonder what they're going to sing next. What do you think, Sato?"

"Who knows? Probably another weird original piece, I guess."

Sato and her friends were watching it all on the television in the common room.

Although today was a holiday, the common room was quite crowded. The students had been watching the live stream for a while now, as though they had nothing better to do.

"Hey, isn't that girl a first-year at our school?" Said one of Sato's friends, pointing at the screen.

"That's right. Huh... First we get the school's own warrior of justice singing pretty well on stage, and now Chako-sensei and a first-year? What's going on? And why am I wasting my day off watching something like this?" Sato wondered, scratching her head.

"Why *are* we watching this, anyway?" Her friend said. Sato pulled out her cell phone.

"It's 'cause I got this message."

"Let me see." Her friend peered into the screen.

The message went as follows:

[Title: An important announcement for all fans of Anete Harami

Sender: Unknown

Message: If you wish to know the truth behind Anete Harami, visit the following web page this afternoon. Address:\_\_\_\_\_]



"That *is* a strange message. So you followed the link and the site was showing a livestream of the Yokohama City Battle of Amateur Bands? What's this all about?"

"Who knows? Maybe I'll just forget the show..." Sato said, tilting her head. At that moment, the Chako-sensei on the screen finally ended her moment of dramatic silence and began to move like the wind.

The band began to play.

Chako-sensei's super-sexy, uber-cool, and extra-energetic playing began without so much as a warning, fast enough to break the rules of the universe.

Those were some terrifying fangs she was keeping hidden. Her skill with the Les Paul was something to behold. It was a heartrending performance.

She was followed by Samoyed Mask V and the low tones of his bass. Detective Wanwan's drums began as well. And then came the vocals, in perfect sync with the passionate beats.

"..."

Sara raised her head. She began to sing.

The lyrics were something like "I'm always watching over you as you watch over me or something-or-other".

It was Anete Harami's song.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH?!" Sato screamed loud enough to blow up the dorms. The television screen trembled.

Her friend curled up with her hands over her ears.

It was all happening right before Sato's eyes, on the other side of the screen.

Chako-sensei's hyper-jaw-dropping guitar technique.

The clownish warrior of justice's overpowering bass.

The young man with the sunglasses and his perfectly precise drumbeats.

Singing in harmony with these instruments was a skinny, homely first-year student.

She was singing Anete Harami's song.

But she wasn't copying the singer when she sang on stage.

It was Anete Harami's song.

Sung by Anete Harami herself.

"H-how?! How is that girl-"

Sato clung to the television like a spider, staring straight at Sara. Flowing into her ears was the voice of Anete Harami, already impressed into Sato's mind through hundreds upon hundreds of replays.

"Oh..."

She suddenly remembered what her underclassman Kino had said about two weeks ago.

*"Is it just me, or... is that girl not actually singing?"*

*"Is it just me, or... is that girl not actually singing?"*

*"Is it just me, or... is that girl not actually singing?"*

And,

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Sato screamed again.

She could not help herself.

<=>

"First one!"

Kino ran outside and discovered two demons, lying one on top of another in front of the community center wall. She first took aim at the demon lying on the top.

*BANG!*

And she pulled the trigger. Of course, the shot landed perfectly. The demon began to regain human form. Kino shot the demon on top first because otherwise the demon on the bottom would be crushed as soon as he turned back into a human.

That was when Chako-sensei's guitar began wailing from the PDA on Kino's belt.

Soon, Sara's voice joined in. Kino could hear it as well.

She recognized Anete Harami's song.

"WHAAAAT?!"

And just like Sato (but not quite as loudly), Kino screamed.

Right now, all she could hear was the song coming from the PDA. In other words, the Take Action Now Club's second performance.

What would everyone play? What kind of melody would Sara sing?

Kino had been looking forward to finding out by using the performance as background music to her work as a warrior of justice. And having only thought, '*This sure came in handy. Thanks, Chako-sensei*', Kino was nothing less than stupefied by the revelation.

She had indeed heard this song before. Kino remembered it well.

"This song... it's from that DVD of the Yokohama concert!" Kino said.

"Yeah. It's the exact same one." Hermes agreed.

Kino glanced down at the PDA. She confirmed visually that it was indeed Sara who was singing this song. There was no mistaking it.

From where in that tiny body was she getting the strength to sing so powerfully? Whatever the case, she was the one behind this overwhelming voice. Kino could tell—the strange feeling that nagged at her as she watched the DVD was completely absent this time as she looked down at the PDA screen.

Kino's singing wasn't too shabby, either. But it would be an insult to Sara to compare the two voices. Hers was truly a professional singing voice.

"What's going on here?" Kino asked Hermes, still not getting the hint.

"Don't you remember, Kino? You said it yourself."

"I said what myself?"

This protagonist has the memory of a goldfish.

"You said that Anete Harami isn't actually singing."

"Oh, right. I did... So that means..."

"Yeah. It was her. That Sara girl was the one who sang the songs."

Kino's eyes turned to dinner plates.

"So they fooled everyone and lip-synched everything? Then what about that other girl? The adorable one that looks like a doll?"

"She's just the face. She's really pretty, but I guess she's not actually a good singer. Talent like that doesn't come around often, you know."

"No way! This isn't the opening ceremony of some international athletic competition!" Mysterious Kino cried, her voice a mix of understanding and shock.

But being a warrior of justice wasn't such a relaxing job that Kino could stand around in awe whenever she liked.

*GUOOOOOHHHH!*

The demon on the bottom knocked away its friend, who was now in human form, and leapt up at Kino.

“Whoa!”

Kino avoided the attack and took advantage of the moment to draw a new weapon from her pouch. This time, it was a Type 99 light machine gun.

This is a weapon that was used by the Japanese Army in World War II. Its magazine holds thirty rounds, and sticks up atop the gun. This isn’t such an unusual design with machine guns.

The Type 99 is reliable and accurate, so it is said to have been one of the Japanese weapons feared most by the American military during the war. It is equipped with a 2.5X telescopic sight, which cut down on ammo usage (ammunition was scarce back then) and helped to raise accuracy. It was an infamous weapon.

As per Imperial Japan’s obsession with putting swords on every firearm (even submachine guns were equipped with bayonets), this gun was also equipped with a bayonet. The blade was a whopping forty centimeters long, a standard Type 30 bayonet that greatly resembled the blade of a katana.

Why would anyone put a bayonet on a machine gun? It’s a mystery, but apparently attaching the bayonet improved balance and accuracy. Or was it just because it looks cool?

“HAAAAAAH!”

The Type 99 that Kino began to fire away on was also equipped with a bayonet. The 7.7mm rounds hit the demon directly. The creature writhed in pain.

Currently, the sound of gunfire and demonic howling was echoing outside the community center, accompanied by Anete Harami’s—no, Sara’s—singing voice.

“Hm...”

Sweat began to form on Kino’s brow.

She could incapacitate the demon as long as she was armed, but she could not turn it back to human form unless she undid her transformation, then transformed back. Because neither Samoyed Mask V nor Detective Wanwan were around, this one instant she needed was not something she could afford so easily.

“Well, they’re busy with the performance.” Hermes said.

“Heh. So what?” Kino said, smiling bravely as she pulled the trigger.

“Oh?”

“I’m a warrior of justice. I can fight just fine on my own!”

“Great. Glad I picked you, then.”

“Right? So I have a suggestion.”

“Yeah?”

"Can you just waive the 'one shot rule' for Big Cannon today? Just for today?"

"Nope."

So Kino went on to endlessly call Hermes stupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupid. Hermes responded with a "What happened to all the cool stuff you just said?!", but this argument is so inane that I'll cut it off here.

<=>

Around the same time, a certain celebrity news reporter's glasses were fogged over.

He watched the broadcast on his computer screen at home, and cried:

"This is one hell of a scandal!"

On his cell phone was displayed the same message that Sato had also received.

At that moment, there was a party on the internet.

On a certain message board, the moment Sara began her song, everything went silent. No posts, no replies. Then, everyone began to post all at once, threatening to paralyze the servers.

Of course, even these Anete Harami fans had received the very same message. Although it's still a mystery as to who got a hold of all of their contact information.

Everyone went online and listened to her song.

And they all realized:

Anete Harami was a fictitious individual.

[So she was lip-synching all this time!]

[There were two people playing her part?!]

[This is crazy... How'd they pull it off?]

[Are they just coming out like this?]

[Is this even legal?]

[Won't she get in trouble with her agency?]

[Is this a guerrilla concert, then? Pretty cool!]

[Is this why Anete suddenly stopped singing recently?]

[I can already hear the heads rolling at her agency.]

[Who cares? They're a bunch of parasites anyway.]

[lol new page]

As the posts about Anete Harami continued, one person broke the trend.

[Hey, doesn't that bassist look kinda like 'Mysterious Handsome Masked Music Fighter Sizu' from *Funefune Douga*<sup>5</sup>? You know, their most-viewed artist?]

<=>

"I get it! So this is what Chako-sensei was trying to do!"

Kino quickly switched the Type-99's magazine and pulled the trigger once more.

She shot little by little, slowly backing away as she kept the demon at bay. She was probably trying to escape from the parking lot and into the woods.

"She'd grab a spot in the concert under the Take Action Now Club's name and let us sing first..." Kino trailed off.

"...and Sara would tag along as an extra, but step into the spotlight for the second song. And since this is an internet broadcast, once she starts singing, it's all over. No one can cover it up. Once this stuff gets on the internet, you can't get it back." Hermes finished for her.

"So is that what the demons were doing today? Trying to stop her from singing?"

"Remember what they looked like when you turned them back? Men in sunglasses and suits."

"I get it!" Kino exclaimed. "They're the ones who tried to take Sara away in the hall just now!"

This protagonist has the deductive skills of a rhino.

"I understand now!"

Pulling the trigger once more at the approaching demon, Kino put on a satisfied look. Mystery solved!

"All I have to do now is..."

*GUUUUUUUUUUUHHHHH!*

...seal away this surprisingly strong demon. That was also the hardest part.

"Hm..."

---

<sup>5</sup> *Funefune Douga* is, of course, a parody of the Japanese video site *Niconico Douga*.

Kino groaned, passing by a certain truck.

Sara's powerful voice carried from the PDA and into the parking lot.

"...Sa... ra..."

A demon lying on the other side of the truck mumbled quietly.

<=>

"Hello? Yes, I'm afraid we can't comment at this time..."

The phones had been ringing off the hook for some time now in the office of the company president.

"It's... over..." The president mumbled, weakly falling to his knees. The wind blowing in from the broken windows chilled everything in its path.

"How did this happen? How? Anete Harami was a household name... I could have raked in profits for years until those girls came of age..." The president said, cradling his head in his hands. None of his employees answered him. They were all too busy taking phone calls.

"Where did I go wrong? Was it when I tricked the Anete face into coming to Japan by promising her an acting career, then extended her idol contract indefinitely while threatening her family in England? Was it when I paid a fortune to social services to take custody of Sara as the Anete singer and kept her under constant surveillance except for her attending school? Or was it when I permanently froze their earnings at fifty thousand yen per month?"

The president quietly whispered to himself, finally slamming his head down on the soft carpet.

"I just don't understand! I didn't do anything wrong!"

Are you sure about that?

<=>

"Argh! This is one stubborn demon!"

Anxiety was written on Kino's face.

The last of the demons did not fall to Kino's barrage, continuing to step ever closer. The shots must have been painful, but it was still full of energy.

Although Kino had no way of knowing this, this particular demon was the leader of the men in suits. Naturally, his determination to finish this mission was on a different level altogether.

Kino lost count of how many times she had replaced the magazine on her Type-99. The barrel was so hot it was starting to glow. It must have been overheating.

"The cat's out of the bag now! So just give up already!"

Sara's second song was being played through the PDA hanging from Kino's belt.

It was a very long piece. The Take Action Now Club had long passed its allotted performance time, but no one tried to stop them now.

Everyone in the community center must have been too shocked. The audience, the judges, and even the crew. The accompaniment was getting more and more elaborate.

"Hah."

For a moment, Kino managed to forget her own dangerous situation. She smiled.

The scene unfolding on the stage was more stupendous than Kino could ever imagine.

*Da-na-na-na-na-na-TING!*

Chako-sensei's passionate skill on the Les Paul and Inuyama's fervent drumming.

But the biggest show-stealer was Samoyed Mask V.

He had suddenly taken out a Gibson Flying V out of nowhere and was now playing it alongside his bass.

And whenever necessary, he would shake a pair of maracas with his hands and play the violin.

How was this possible? Well, all he did was play one note on one instrument, then quickly switch to the next instrument and play a note.

Because he was moving so quickly, his instruments did not have time to fall to the ground. Samoyed Mask was thusly playing four parts on his own—perfectly—and adding great depth to the piece they were performing.

The audience was astounded.

Live reactions from some of the people who were watching the broadcast:

[It's him! It's Mysterious Handsome Masked Music Fighter Sizu!]

[He's here! It's Sizu-sama's guitar-bass-maracas-violin quadruple performance!]

[No way! He was real? I thought he was just a CGI guy playing a bunch of live-action instruments!]

[We're witnessing a legend in the making!]

Looks like this corner of the internet had no interest in the unfolding Anete Harami scandal.



Oh well.

"Damn it!"

Kino had left herself open for a single moment.

Running into the parking lot to find a place to transform under cover turned out to be a terrible idea, as the demon tossed a Mazda RX-8 at her mid-lunge. It then guessed at the direction Kino would dodge towards, and found itself quite lucky.

The sound of the RX-8 turning into scrap metal was accompanied by the demon's powerful kick.

"Tch!"

Kino already knew that it was too late to dodge.

But she did everything she could in the short span of time she had between spotting the demon's attack and the kick inevitably connecting.

She thoroughly cooled the Type-99, removed the bayonet, placed it back in her pouch, and closed the pouch. She then removed the PDA from her belt for fear of being scolded by Chako-sensei if it were to be totaled by the demon and placed it next to her. Hermes, she left on her belt, though.

"Ugh!"

The demon kicked her square in the gut. Kino flew through the air and hit a Nissan GT-R that was parked in the lot. She only came to a stop after breaking the security alarm on this cheap nine million yen car.

"That hurt, damn it!"

Kino quickly got to her feet. But the demon was also quite fast. Right after landing the blow on Kino, it had decided to end things once and for all by ramming into her shoulder-first.

"Argh!"

*'Again!*

*'I can't dodge this one!*

*'I'm gonna get hit!*

*'It looks like it's going to hurt!*

*'If I write out my thoughts like this, it kind of looks like poetry!'* Kino thought.

At that moment,

*GUOHHHHHHHHH!*

Yet another demon roared from beside her. A demon covered in golden fur.

*POW!*

The black demon was sent flying into a Mazda Roadster, bounced back up into the air, and flattened the Toyota Mark X that lay underneath.

"Huh?" Kino said blankly.

Although she had opened fire on demons more times than she could count, this was the first time she had received assistance from one. She regretted not taking any pictures.

"Hey... thanks." She said without thinking.

The golden demon glanced at Kino. And instead of attacking her, it began to saunter towards the black demon that stood before a Toyota Supra.

"Hey..." Hermes began.

"I know. That's Elias, right?" Kino said, stepping forward. She took another step. She had undone her transformation and transformed back.

"I don't believe this."

Kino watched the golden demon as it walked towards the black demon. The latter slowly got to its feet, raising its fists.

"Is this how far you're willing to go...?" Kino said to the golden demon, "is this how far you wanted to go to save Sara?!"

The golden demon did not answer.

But its pace slowed.

"I understand."

Kino holstered Big Cannon.

"I'm going to do everything I can to help you. So I'll hand over the spotlight today! You're the hero this time, Elias!" She cried at him, and drew from her pouch a pair of—

"What's that?" Hermes asked.

Kino was holding a tiny pair of flags on sticks. They were the kind of flags you saw people waving at marathons on the streets.

"Can't you tell? They're flags. Here. Take a look." Kino said. Hermes opened his eyes wide (Editorial dept.: Hermes's eyes?) and examined them.

[Do your best, Elias! You can do anything you put your mind to!]

[Go! Go! Show that demon who's boss!]

The lopsided words had been written on the light green cloth flags with a permanent marker.

"Well, I can see they're flags. But what are you going to do with them?"

"Elias looked so weak that I scraped together some old handkerchiefs and some cleaning rods I use for my guns really quickly."

"When?!"

"Nifty, huh? I can just wave 'em around to cheer Elias on."

"...Is that all?"

"Yeah. I'll just wait for them to tire themselves out fighting each other, then seal it away when it's helpless. I'm a genius, aren't I?"

*'That's terrible. You call that helping? More like cheerleading.'* Hermes wanted to say, but he remained silent.

"Do your best, Elias!"

*'Dear Goddess. Please do something about this protagonist.'* Hermes thought.

Sara's passionate voice continued to shake the hearts of all her listeners.

*GUUUUOOOOOHHHHH!*

At that moment, Elias was fighting.

Wearing the form of a demon, against a man who was also wearing a demon's skin.

To save Sara, facing a man who was here to kidnap her.

The two demons were locked in a fierce battle, destroying cars left and right as they fought.

"C'mon! Now! Throw him a right hook! Don't fall back! Keep pushing forward!"

As the warrior of justice watched, doing nothing but waving little flags, the duel between demons grew more intense.

*GUOHH!*

The black demon effortlessly tossed a Toyota Vitz at the golden demon.

*GUOHH!*

The golden demon grabbed a Honda Insight and deflected the attack as though batting at a baseball.

Two more cars for the scrap heap. Their drivers would probably weep at the sight. The Insight in particular looked brand-new.

The black demon charged, its arms forward.

The golden demon did not budge. Instead, it took the black demon's arms to engage it in a pushing match.

*GRAAAHH! GUOOHHH!*

The demons howled.

"You can do it!"

The warrior of justice continued cheering from the sidelines.

As Sara's passionate voice shook the world, the parking lot was engulfed in flames.

<=>

Sara was singing.

She had never sung before such a large crowd before.

At first, the audience watched with their mouths agape.

But now, they were on their feet, sometimes cheering with a cry of "Anete!"

Even still, though Sara knew that this performance would free her and the other Anete, who was recovering from her illness, she could not bring herself to be entirely happy.

She found a moment between lyrics to take her mouth away from the microphone.

"Elias..." She mumbled quietly.

But the ordinary little girl quickly returned to being a national idol as she continued to project her voice towards the world.

Meanwhile, at the school dorms:

"ANETE!" Sato cried with all her might, cheering Sara on from the common room.

Although Sara could not hear, Sato's encouragement did not fail to reach her.

<=>

*GRRRRRRRR!*

*GRRROOOOAAAAR!*

The demons' battle had reached its climax.

The golden demon and the black demon, evenly matched in strength, finally broke their stalemate as the golden demon took advantage of a moment of distraction to throw the black demon onto a truck. And as it leapt to try and stomp on the black demon, the black demon countered by kicking with both feet, sending the golden demon flying.

The golden demon landed on its feet, and leapt across the pavement.

The black demon got it its feet, and leapt across the pavement.

They two demons ran across the parking lot and crashed into each other.

Tactics mattered nothing at this point.

In power, they were equals.

So all they could do was clench their fists and fight head-on, like knights in a jousting tournament.

They would not back down.

They would not turn tail.

With their pride on the line, the two men quickly closed the gap between them.

*Gulp.*

Kino swallowed. Sara's beautiful voice echoed from her PDA.

Perhaps that song was what decided the outcome of this battle.

*Guoooooh...*

The black demon was launched into the air. It flew in an arc, landing on a Ferrari F430 Scuderia. It fell right through the chassis and landed on the pavement.

Kino stepped in, standing beside the mangled Ferrari.

"You're pretty good. I haven't had this much trouble in so long. You showed me that I still lack training. So thanks for the lesson." She said, taking aim with Big Cannon.

"Well, now..."

Having turned the tenth demon back into human form (another man in a suit), Kino mumbled to herself.

There was now just one left.

The golden demon was three meters away, frozen in the position it had taken when it had sent the black demon flying.

Kino first undid her transformation, then cast the spell once more to transform into a warrior of justice.

"Now what?"

"You have to turn him back. What are you waiting for? You could shoot him here and now."

"That's true, Hermes. But..." Kino said, slowly approaching the golden demon, "if we turn him back, he'll lose his memories of having been a demon."

"Probably, judging from all the cases we've seen so far."

"Elias fought so hard today. It'd be a shame if he just forgot all the awesome stuff he did."

"Yeah, but..."

Hermes understood what Kino was trying to say.

Elias needed the confidence boost from accomplishing something this remarkable. It would challenge him to aspire to even more in the future.

But transforming into a demon might turn into an addiction. He couldn't transform every time trouble presented itself for the rest of his life.

"So let's try and settle things peacefu--"

*Whoosh.* There was a powerful impact. Something bore down on Kino.

"Whoa!"

She quickly raised her arm to defend herself, but she was pushed right back into an Audi R8.

"Ugh! That hurt!"

She looked up. The golden demon responsible for attacking her was standing there.

"What gives?!" Kino howled.

"In the end, he's still a demon, Kino." Hermes said coolly from Kino's side. Kino had no choice but to agree.

"I guess I'll have to seal him away, then... I wish I didn't have to, though."

The song coming from Kino's PDA was just about to end.

Chako-sensei and Shizu were standing back-to-back, playing a spectacular dual-guitar solo. The crowds were going wild at this display of energy.

After their solo would be Sara's final part. Then it would all be over.

Kino stared down at the golden demon, five meters ahead.

"Let's finish this."

She holstered Big Cannon.

Kino then drew a Smith & Wesson Model 500 revolver. This weapon is one of the world's most powerful handguns, with a four-inch barrel and compatibility with .50 Magnum cartridges. Although it looks no different from a normal revolver at first glance, it is almost laughably large for its proportions.

Machine guns would be of no use at this distance now. Everything would end in a single strike.

This handgun was the only weapon available to Kino in this situation, as she could freely aim with it without sacrificing power. Her plan was to shoot the golden demon in the arms and legs in the midst of their struggle, finally sealing it away with Big Cannon once it was down.

This was the only option left to her. The Model 500 could only hold five rounds—once she needed a sixth shot, she would have lost.

"..."

Kino silently stared down the golden demon.

The golden demon silently stared Kino down.

The Les Paul sang for one last time.

The instrumentals came to a close.

Sara's voice echoed from the PDA.

The two warriors leapt forward.

Kino waited for a single moment—the moment in which her foe would attack.

The golden demon swung its left hand.

"Hah!"

Kino took hold of the Model 500 with her left hand and pulled the trigger in the blink of an eye.

She then squatted down, facing her right, and fired off another round at the demon's jaw.

*GAAAOH!*

The demon's head was thrown backwards.

"Now!"

Taking advantage of the demon's sights being forced upwards, Kino tightly gripped Big Cannon with her right hand.

"Argh!"

But as she drew Big Cannon from the holster, the demon's left leg stopped her.

All of this had taken place in the span of a mere second.

"Argh... C'mon..."

Kino was struggling to free her right hand.

*Grrrrr...*

The golden demon was pressing down on her arm with its left foot, balancing on its right leg.

The fierce struggle had resulted in this silent deadlock.

It was a battle of the soul—

Between a boy who had become a demon to protect the girl he loved,

And a gourmand of a girl who only ever thought of food.

"Hey, narrator guy! Talk about prejudice."

An attempt at a nitpicking of Kino, by Kino, for Kino.

Perhaps this was what decided the outcome of this battle.

In the short span of time our protagonist took to nitpick at the narration, the demon swung its right leg. Its foot was driven straight into Kino's side.

"Oof!"

Kino was thrown back like a bullet, crashing into the car standing in the center of the lot—a Bugatti Veyron, a high-end, 170 million-yen luxury car.

"Ugh...!"

Both the Bugatti and Kino were thrown into the air by the impact. Looks like time-space is slightly slow in these parts. Look! That's an arc they're drawing in the air.

The Veyron, crumpled like a piece of scrap metal, rolled down the slope in the woods. Kino landed on the parking lot pavement.

The golden demon lunged at her, grabbing her by the neck with its thick arms and lifting her into the air.

"Argh!"

Ouch. That sounded painful. If Kino hadn't been in the form of a warrior of justice, she would have been killed in an instant.



"C'mon, Kino. Open your eyes." Hermes said calmly from her belt.

Kino's eyelids slowly opened. She glared at the golden demon that was choking her.

"Grk..."

She then reached with her right hand, which was finally free, towards Big Cannon.

"..."

Her vision suddenly grew blurry.

The blood had stopped flowing into her brain. She was on the verge of suffocating.

Even a sturdy warrior of justice is bound to experience hemoglobin deficiency if blood is cut off from her brain for too long.

Her sense of reasoning went down the drain. Just like a certain politician's approval ratings.

*'Huh. What was I going to do again?'*

Kino desperately tried to reason out her actions with what little oxygen she had left.

*'Oh, right. I was. Going to. Stuff myself full. With shabu-shabu.'*

No.

"This is no time to be unconscious, Kino." Hermes said.

But to Kino, it just sounded like: "Apparently sesame sauce and bitter orange dressing go really well together, Kino."

But it was over. There was no strength left in her body. Kino began to feel sleepy.

*'Good night.'*

She was on the verge of heading to dreamland.

At that moment, she heard a song.

To be specific, the song had been playing all this time from the sturdy PDA hanging from Kino's belt.

It was Sara's song.

The final performance.

[That's why I~♪]

On the stage, Sara came to a decision.

She resolved to do something that she had never once done in the studio.

[That's why I~♪]

She continued the song.

[That's why I love you, Elias!]

She finished the song, intentionally changing the lyrics.

Sara wore a bright, beautiful smile.

The hands gripping Kino by the neck suddenly lost their force.

"Pass the dressing...!" Kino mumbled in her sleep, falling to the ground.

"Ouch! Whoa!"

She landed on her rear and opened her eyes.

"Now's your chance, Kino!"

Kino looked straight ahead. It was just as Hermes said.

The golden demon was standing there blankly, as though its soul had been sucked out.

As though it had forgotten to fight altogether.

"All right!"

Kino quickly stepped back, keeping her eyes trained on the demon. There was a distance of three meters between them now.

With great difficulty, she drew Big Cannon from its holster and raised the hammer with her thumb.

"I'll turn you back!"

She took aim at the demon's chest.

She began to apply pressure to her trigger finger.

But at that moment, Kino noticed something.

"Huh?"

She could not believe her eyes. Kino blinked rapidly.

But no matter how many times she opened her eyes again, she always came to the same conclusion.

The constant conclusion was that the demon was changing.

It grew smaller and smaller. It slid inwards as it became more and more humanoid in form.

"How...?" Kino wondered, Big Cannon still trained on the demon.

"Who knows?" Hermes answered.

Chako-sensei, Samoyed Mask V, and Detective Wanwan's accompaniment served as background music to this scene of the demon's transformation.

The demon was now half its original size of three meters.

The golden fur covering its body was now pale skin, covered in a school uniform. Wait, didn't the uniform get shredded earlier? Oh well.

Its fierce mane turned into a slightly messy head of blond.

"...What's going on?"

Without thinking, Kino looked down at Big Cannon, still in the grip of her right hand. The hammer was still raised, meaning that she had not shot the demon.

"I don't get it. This doesn't make sense. It can't be!"

If even Hermes was surprised, this must be something remarkable.

And the moment the accompaniment ended—

The golden demon returned to being the young boy known as Elias.

Standing there was Elias alone.

A thunderous roar of applause swallowed the concert hall.

Kino heard everything through the PDA.

"...Oh..."

She noticed Elias opening his eyes.

Their eyes met.

Kino quickly holstered Big Cannon, as quickly as she had drawn it. She did not forget to pull the trigger as she held the hammer and gently lowered it.

"You're... Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino!"

These were Elias's first words.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. That's right."

His next words were:

"Is Sara all right?!"

What selflessness. It seemed like he had lost his memories of the time he was a demon.

"..."

Kino narrowed her eyes, looking at the little warrior. She then took the PDA from her belt and held it before his eyes.

"She's free now. Don't worry. It's all thanks to you."

Sara was on the screen, having finished the song.

[Anete! Anete! Anete! Anete! Anete!]

The crowd was going wild.

Sara energetically waved her tiny hands with a smile. She was basking in glorious light.

"WOW! Amazing! We actually did it!" Elias cried joyously.

Kino decided to act the part of a proper upperclassman.

"Go on back to the waiting room, now. Someone's gotta welcome Sara back when she goes to get some well-deserved rest."

"Yes! Thank you! Thank you so much, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino!" Elias said, beaming. Then,

"Huh? Wait... Kino... Kino...? Kino-senpai...?" He mumbled, frowning slightly. Kino grinned.

"Total strangers. Now hurry up!"

"R-right!"

Elias spun round on his heels, running as fast as his legs could carry him. He sprinted past the community center doors and disappeared inside.

Kino was alone in the parking lot, which now looked more like a junkyard than anything else.

"That feels great. It's all hunky-dory now!" She said innocently at the sky.

Of course, insurance companies would shed tears of blood come tomorrow. But that's really not my problem.

<=>

November 4th, after school.

"Hi everyone." Kino said, stepping into the music prep room.

"Hi!"

"Hello, Kino."

"Good afternoon."

Chako-sensei, Shizu, and Inuyama greeted her.

They were sitting around a table, atop which were countless sparkling cakes lined up one after another.

"Perfect timing. Let's start with some tea." Chako-sensei said.

Yesterday, once the commotion was finished—

Kino used the pay phone in the community center to call Chako-sensei's cell phone. Chako-sensei picked up immediately.

"I heard there was some huge commotion over at the community center. What should I do?" Kino asked, pretending that she didn't know a thing.

[I think Elias and I will be enough here, Kino. Don't get yourself involved in the mess; you can go home for today. I'm going to tell Shizu and Inuyama the same thing, too. I'm sure we'll be able to take care of our cars and gear somehow. I'll see you tomorrow at school, okay?]

And so, Kino was able to avoid becoming involved in the incident that shook Japan's entertainment industry to its foundations. She strode down the hill and returned to the dorms.

"Thanks for the meal!" Kino sang, digging into a piece of cake. Shizu and Inuyama followed suit.

"You can keep eating, but listen closely, everyone!" Chako-sensei said, unfolding several newspapers.

Celebrity gossip mags, sports papers, regular papers, and finance papers. The same incident was at the front page of each publication.

Of course, it was the Anete Harami scandal.

"This is..."

Yesterday, when Kino returned to the dorms, she headed for the common room to watch some television. There, she ran into an outraged Sato.

"We will *never* forgive the greedy agency that so brutally abused these two helpless girls! What do you say, everyone?!"

The other dormitory students, who were also fans of Anete Harami, agreed.

"Yeah!" "Unforgivable!" "Kick 'em out of the country!"

Kino remembered this scene and turned to Chako-sensei.

"What's going to happen now?"

"Well... where should I start?" Chako-sensei wondered.

Kino, Shizu, and Inuyama were frozen, despite the presence of cake. Chako-sensei began to explain the situation.

"First of all, the evil president of Anete Harami's agency was arrested yesterday and charged with all sorts of nasty offenses. Apparently he didn't even try to escape; he just sat there in his office, mumbling something about a grandmother."

And? And?

"The girl who was the face of Anete Harami was so troubled by the lies she was a part of, so she ended up with a stomach ulcer. She was hospitalized in the States, but she's heard the news. I've been told that she's very relieved. She's free from the president's threats now, so I'm sure she must be meeting with her family, who flew in from England. But I think she wants to continue to pursue acting. Isn't it wonderful? Girls should be tough and determined, just like her."

Of course.

"And over here in Japan, one idol falls and another rises!"

I hope I don't have to explain who she's talking about.

"Uh... who?"

Kino! She's talking about Anete Harami and Sara!

"Oh! Right!"

"Who are you talking to, Kino? Anyway, Sara's been freed now, and she's even getting back all of the pay that was forcibly taken from her. I introduced her to a great lawyer, you see. And she says she wants to switch from the hotel they housed her in to the school dorms. Kino, you might end up sitting side-by-side with her for breakfast as soon as tomorrow!"

"That's great! Just warn her first that when it comes to eating contests, I never lose."

No one said anything about eating contests.

Shizu quietly raised his hand.

"So now Sara will be able to live her own life as a singer and as a student, correct?"

"Yes, Shizu."

"That's wonderful." Inuyama said.

"It certainly is." Shizu agreed. Inuyama glanced at him for a moment, but said nothing more.

"But I bet she's probably going to start up a third role, other than a singer and a student." Chako-sensei said with an impish grin.

"?" "

The boys looked quite confused. But Kino, the only female member of the club—

"Heh."

Smiled meaningfully.

Shizu and Inuyama tilted their heads, but Kino did not tell them the answer.

Sara's third new role: Elias's girlfriend.

## **Chapter 7 - Finale: Demon**

~Elias~

The days passed by in tranquil peace.

Finally, it was the first weekend after Culture Day.

Special features on the Anete Harami scandal were being broadcast today, and the deeds of the evil company president who was behind all of this were being exposed one by one.

Also on the news was the fact that the Anete Harami face—who had been so troubled by having to fool people through her work that she was hospitalized with a stomach ulcer—had recovered and returned to England for the time being to join her family.

[This incident highlights the fact that we Japanese are much too trusting! These poor girls have helped us understand the fact of our own weakness. Of course, I've always suspected that something was off about Anete Harami's singing.]

Well, it's not like anyone can prove this guy's claim one way or another. Hindsight is 20/20.

The talk show host was speaking on behalf of the viewers. And of course, viewers would naturally want to say, 'that's what I was thinking the whole time'.

And the one person who really did notice ahead of time, our hero in the gym uniform, passed by the big TV and went from the common room to the entrance hall.

It was just before noon.

When Kino walked out, she happened to see a large black car parked just outside the doors.

The car was a super-luxurious Mercedes Benz S-Class sedan. Disembarking from it were several bodyguards. They looked quite similar to the men who had been turned into demons a few days ago.

Kino approached the car.

"Excuse us."

The men gently pushed her aside.

"Kino-senpai!"

They suddenly stopped at the sound of the voice that came from the car.

Sara stepped out of the sedan, wearing her school uniform.

Although she had become a household name overnight, Sara was still young. So she declined the many interview requests from the media, and had taken the first steps towards becoming a normal singer.

"Hey, Sara! Fancy meeting you here."

Sara was still the same as ever, with her hair in pigtails and freckles all over her face.



"Kino-senpai! I'm moving into the dorms today. Let's get along!"

"All right! If you ever need any help, just ask!" Kino said, putting her fist over her chest. "Your stuff isn't here yet, is it? Wanna go have lunch while you wait?"

"Yes!" Sara smiled. "Would you mind if I brought someone along?"

"Huh?"

Kino tilted her head. Sara turned and pointed at someone hiding behind a lamppost a slight distance away.

There was no mistaking that head of golden hair. Elias shrank back slightly from his hiding place.

"Sure! But if he's not living in the dorms, he's gonna have to pay for his meal." Kino said jokingly, but Sara grinned.

"It's all right. I'm buying!"

Kino had heard everything from Chako-sensei several days earlier: Sara had gotten back all of the money that had been taken away from her. She had initially declined the sum, saying that she was also responsible as a part of the Anete Harami charade. However...

*"You might as well take the money. Think of it as all of your fans' encouragement to you!"* Chako-sensei had said, eventually convincing Sara to accept it. And so, Sara was now very rich.

"Then let's call him over. Hey, Elias! Let's have lunch together!" Kino bellowed. Elias flinched for a moment.

"..."

He sheepishly emerged from behind the lamppost, not looking any different from the way he was before the demonic transformation. His hair was messy, and he was wearing a normal pair of jeans and a simple checkered shirt.

"Huh? He doesn't look any different." Kino said.

"That's because Elias is always himself!" Sara replied with a smile.

Kino had thought that Elias's experiences as a demon might have perhaps helped him grow more confident. But this was reality.

"Um... Sorry, Kino-senpai... were you talking to me?" Elias said feebly, approaching them.

*'Huh. So that transformation didn't help him out at all.'* Kino thought, deflating.

"Yeah! I was! Elias, Sara and I are going to have lunch together at the cafeteria. Come eat with us! Sara's buying, you know?"

"What? But I-"

"It's okay, Elias! I'm buying today! Let's go!"

Sara pushed him along.

"Whoa, wait! Okay! You don't have to push!"

Elias entered the dormitory building. Kino nodded towards the bodyguards in a simple greeting and followed after her underclassmen. The bodyguards weren't so rude that they would follow Sara into the building.

"All right! Time for a peaceful meal!"

Several minutes later.

"Thanks for the meal!"

"Thanks for the meal."

"Thanks for the meal."

The three students clasped their hands in prayer, sitting at a table in the still-empty cafeteria.

In front of Sara was an ordinary bowl of tempura udon.

In front of Elias and Kino were extra-large helpings of today's meat-n'-veggies stir-fry combo.

Plus plates of Neapolitan Spaghetti.

And bowls of egg udon.

Sara the celebrity was quite the eye-catching sight in the cafeteria today. But standing out more than her was the amount of food piled before Kino and Elias.

"Come on! Dig in." Kino said, reaching for her udon with her chopsticks.

"Elias, are you all right?" Sara asked Elias worriedly.

Sara's concern was quite well-founded. When they were standing in line to place their orders earlier, Elias had, one by one, ordered the same foods as Kino.

For a moment, Elias held back the urge to dive into his food like his upperclassman.

"Don't worry. I'm fine. Actually, ever since the concert, I've been really hungry all the time. So... I've started eating more and more. Don't worry. I... I'll make sure to finish it all." He answered honestly.

"Hm..."

Sara did not pry any further. Kino's chopsticks froze mid-reach.

"Don't worry about it, kiddo. You're still young! You're still growing! This much isn't even breakfast for you, right? So I bet you're going to start getting taller and taller!" She said, before returning to her battle with the bowl of udon.

Sara giggled at Kino's fervent pace.

"Let's eat, Elias!"

"Yeah."

Elias nodded.

And so, he began to stuff food into his mouth almost quickly enough to shock Kino. It was starting to look like an eating contest.

Sara sat there in awe of their appetite for some time, before slowly starting on her own meal.

From Kino's belt—in other words, under the table:

*'C'mon, Kino. Looks like you still need more training.'*

Hermes was astonished. It was clear to him why Elias's appetite had suddenly grown tremendously.

*'Of course someone with superhuman abilities would eat superhuman amounts of food.'* He thought.

"This udon hits the spot!"

Kino, however, seemed to be completely ignorant of the implications of this new development.

*'I guess there's no rush for now.'* Hermes thought, *'And it looks like I won't be doing much for a while, so I guess I'll take a nap.'*

With that, he closed his eyes. (Editorial Dept.: Again with the eyes!)

**Chapter 7 End**

## **Chapter 6.5: The Story of a Certain Grenade Girl**

### **~After School Tea Time~**

Once upon a time, on a certain day, at a certain time, at a certain school, there wandered a grenade girl.

'Grenade girl' did not mean that the girl was a grenade, nor did it mean that she was a supplier of industrial-use grenades.

She was just an adorable little girl who often made use of grenades.

She was between ten and twelve years of age, with short white hair and emerald-green eyes.

Did she have no emotions at all, or was she just good at hiding them? She was the kind of person whose photograph would come up first on a Google Images search of the word 'stoic'.

Her stick-thin legs stuck out of a pair of white shorts, and she wore a brown long-sleeved shirt with a circular neck. Slung over her shoulder was a messenger bag that hung over her rear.

The girl quietly walked through the halls of the school.

It was after school, the very end of evening. Night was just beginning to fall.

The world outside the windows was almost pitch-black.

Because it was almost midterm season, club activities had been put on hold for the time. There were no students on the school grounds.

And yet this girl, who did not look at all like a student of this academy,

"..."

Silently,

"..."

Looked round at the halls, the walls, and the floors, sometimes putting her hands on them,

"..."

As she slowly walked by.

"..."

The girl had been quietly walking by a particular classroom and had come to a stop before the door.

"—please—don't want—cause trouble—Elias—"

She could hear fragments of a conversation from inside. The voice of a girl.

"..."

The grenade girl looked through the glass pane in the door.

She could not see inside. But she peered in anyway.

"—not at all—I swear—"

It was a different voice this time. The voice of a boy.

"..."

The girl's tiny hand silently reached the door, sliding it open without so much as a warning.

"Eeek!" "Whoa!"

Inside the classroom were two terrified, scared people.

One was a boy. A boy with blond hair.

The other was a girl. A girl with her hair in pigtails.

They were both in school uniforms, wearing indoor shoes that indicated that they were in their first year at the academy.

But more important than their surprised faces was the fact that they were both crying.

The grenade girl's sudden entrance hadn't jolted them into sobs. They were already crying before that. Their eyes were watery, and their faces were streaked with tears.

"..."

The grenade girl looked at them for nine seconds, saying nothing.

The two students, also very surprised at the white-haired girl's sudden intrusion,

"..." "..."

Also remained silent.

The pigtailed girl was the first to break the silence.

"Um... are you looking for something?"

The grenade girl responded as though the past several seconds of silence had never even happened.

"I was surveying. If the halls could take it. Chain explosions. If not, it throws them off. My calculations. It's important. I want to survey. This classroom, too."

Only trained readers of Gakuen Kino would be able to understand what she was saying.

The pigtailed girl and the blond boy were both looking at her with their jaws on the floor, just like the time they stepped into a convenience store and found that the clerk was an alien.

"Anyway." The grenade girl said, this time questioning the students. "What are you doing here?"

"W-we..."

The pigtailed girl tried to begin somehow, but she trailed off and went silent.

"..." "

"You were crying." The grenade girl said.

"..." "

"Both of you."

"..." "

"You look sad."

"..." "

"Something must have happened."

"..." "

"What's wrong?"

The question was so natural in the flow of the conversation that the pigtailed girl answered without even thinking.

"We're both completely powerless..."

Such heavy words. She must have meant that the two of them had no way of changing things for the better, which had left both of them in tears.

"Whose problem is it?"

"Mine." The pigtailed girl said firmly.

The boy hung his head.

"If... if only I was more grown up... if only I was stronger..." He mumbled, his nose stuffy. His tears fell onto the floor. One drop after another.

"Please! Please don't cry for my sake anymore. I'm begging you!" The girl said. But the boy's sobs continued.

"Please... if you cry, we'll both be sad. So please..." The girl continued, her words perhaps intended more for herself, "Please... don't cry."

And so, even the pigtailed girl burst into sobs.

"..."

The grenade girl kept her eyes on the crying students, lost deep in thought in spite of appearances.

"..."

Oh! It looks like she's thought of something good. In spite of appearances.

"Tell me."

"...What?" "...What?"

"Your problems. Tell me. I'll help you."

"H-how...?" Asked the pigtailed girl.

"With grenades, if I can."

"What?"

"If not, some other way."

"..."

"So tell me."

"...But what good is that going to do...?"

"None, maybe. But if it won't make a difference anyway, tell me."

"..."

Soon, both the pigtailed girl and the blond boy stopped crying. They both looked at the girl strangely.

It was five seconds later that the pigtailed girl finally revealed the source of her troubles.

"I'm actually—"

**Chapter 6.5 End**